The Lights Above Rigel B

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The Lights Above Rigel B

by Anonymous

Summary

For a shotacon (underage) prompt on the kink meme. Ten-year-old Cecil; predatory adult Carlos. Obviously very AU. More detailed warnings in the notes.

The Cecearl occurs in chapters 20 and 21, and is between consenting adults.

Notes

Dear listeners, here is a list of warnings.

Underage. Child sexual abuse. Child emotional abuse. Child neglect. Grooming (conditioning an abuse victim to find the abuse more normal or acceptable). Sadistic fantasies. Trauma-induced dissociation. Cecil's mother is mentally ill, in such a way that she is unable to care for her children. Carlos is a manipulative predator. Cecil has been conditioned into seeing many unhealthy or dangerous things as normal, and his POV reflects that.

If any of these elements are going to bother, annoy, upset, disgust, and/or trigger you, please close this tab or use your browser's back button to exit the fic now.

In real life, RAINN (rainn.org) provides information, resources, and support for people affected by these issues. Please know that you can get in touch with them if you need to.

Chinese translation available here, by JustAnother Poet.

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [Restricted Work] by 夜谷说 (Thirtyfiveowls)

Rain

Rain poured down from the sky, sloshing along the pavement, battering the hard dry Arizona soil. Under the flimsy shelter of the bus stop, Cecil hugged his backpack to his chest and hoped his homework wasn't getting too wet.

He should have gone straight home after school, probably. Or at least not stayed at the observatory for the whole presentation. But how was he supposed to know it would get this bad? Cecil could probably count on one hand the number of times he'd seen this much rain in his *whole life*.

Besides, his favorite scientist *ever* was the one doing the presentation today. Cecil was okay with missing his bus when it meant he got to spend another half an hour learning about supernovas from the world's most perfect voice.

All the scientists at the Isenberg Observatory were nice, of course. They let Cecil hang out behind the scenes in between tours, and even let him look at their research sometimes. After he mentioned to one of them that he didn't get an allowance (but it was okay, because Mom would probably just forget about it anyway, like she sometimes forgot to top up his meal card for the cafeteria), they gave him a special permanent pass so he could get into all the presentations for free. And he was probably just about the youngest person they let look through the really big telescope.

But none of them were quite as special and beautiful and perfect as....

"Cecil?"

Cecil let out a *totally* embarrassing squeak of surprise. *Carlos.* Smart, amazing Carlos was standing *right there*, in the pool of yellow light from the streetlamp, protected from the rain by a long coat and a big sensible black umbrella.

"I thought that was you," said Carlos. "What are you doing here?"

"Waitin' for the bus in the rain," stammered Cecil. "Except I missed the 37, an' the 35 is late."

"Uh-huh. Do you always take the bus home by yourself? This late at night?"

"I ride the bus by myself all the time," said Cecil proudly.

"Is that so? Good for you. Look, I bet the buses are all going to be pretty slow because of the rain. How about if I call your parents so they can come pick you up?"

Carlos was *so nice*. This was the most he had ever talked to Cecil in a row, and he was being even nicer than Cecil thought he would. "Okay, but Mom doesn't drive. Or answer phones. My brother might pick up the phone but he doesn't drive either. He just yells."

"And your dad can't...?"

"Dunno his phone number." Cecil rested his heels against the damp pavement and spun the toes of his shoes around in the air. "Or if he's anywhere near here. Or his name. So that probably wouldn't work."

"Uh-huh," said Carlos. "Do you know your address?"

That made Cecil a little annoyed. "I'm *ten*, I'm not a *baby*."

"No." There was a funny look in Carlos's eyes. "No, you sure aren't. How about if I give you a ride home?"

Cecil's eyes widened, his mouth dropping into a soft *o* of shock. No *way*. A ride in Carlos's car? Just him and Carlos? "You mean it?"

"Sure, why not." The weird look was gone -- now Carlos was just smiling. *At Cecil.* "Can't hurt."

He beckoned for Cecil to come with him, so Cecil, starstruck, hopped off the bench and joined him under the umbrella.

At work Carlos didn't talk to Cecil a lot. He didn't ever have time to show Cecil his work, either, but that was okay, some people were just busier than others. Especially when they had science work that was as important as Carlos's. Also, maybe Cecil was too much of a kid for Carlos to bother with. Sure, he was looking more grown-up every day, but Carlos was as old as his mom. Maybe even older.

He was fine with admiring Carlos from a distance. He never in the *world* thought he would get to walk right up next to Carlos's side, all the way to the staff parking lot, with Carlos's arm around his shoulders to help keep the umbrella centered over them.

Of course perfect Carlos had a wonderful car, a sporty little hybrid with automatic locks and GPS. He stood over Cecil on the passenger side while Cecil got in, and showed Cecil how to type in his address, so a monotone female voice would read out the directions. The headlights shone through the rain and lit up the surfaces of huge puddles, sometimes covering whole stretches of road.

Cecil kept quiet mostly. He didn't want to distract Carlos from driving, and also he was shy. But when he recognized the street three blocks away from his apartment, he knew he had to say something now or never. "Your presentation today was really great."

"You saw it?" asked Carlos.

"I see all the presentations!" exclaimed Cecil. "My favorites are the ones about things in the sky we don't understand. Because then if you're lucky you get to watch as they turn into things we *do* understand. B-but supernovas are neat too!"

"Believe me, there's a lot we still don't understand about supernovas," said Carlos. "You're a pretty smart kid, aren't you, Cecil?"

"Uh-huh," said Cecil breathlessly. Carlos thought he was *smart*.

The GPS directed them right up to the front of Cecil's building. Instead of stopping by the door, Carlos pulled all the way around into the parking lot. "Let me walk you in."

"It's okay!" said Cecil. "If I sprint, I'll probably hardly get wet at all."

"Well, sure. But I want to make sure you get all the way in." In the ambient glow from the headlights, Carlos smiled. His teeth were shiny and white, like a TV ad for cleaning products. "Cute little thing like you, some bad person might want to come after you."

Cecil could feel his face turning beet-red. *Carlos thought he was cute.*

Secrets

The day after the rain, Cecil came to the observatory after school like always. He sat in one of the exhibit rooms, the one with the big models of planets (Cecil's favorites were the *theoretical exoplanets*, especially the dark one that didn't have any sun at all), to do his math homework, then went down to the cafeteria to get dinner.

The observatory cafeteria was Cecil's favorite place ever to eat. At school they only had one choice per day, and at home nothing was ever cooked and there was only water to drink. Here everything was bright and clean, nobody threw mashed potatoes at you, and you could get soda every day if you wanted.

He was sitting alone at a table with an enchilada and a Mountain Dew when a beautiful, perfect voice said, "Is this seat taken?"

Cecil's mouth dropped open. Perfect Carlos was standing right next to him, *again*, holding a tray and wearing his official ID and with perfect, perfect hair. "No! Nobody's here! Do you -- d'you wanna sit here?"

"Sure." And Carlos *sat down*, right across from him. "You eat here a lot, right?"

"Uh-huh." Cecil tried to look politely at Carlos, but he was so shy that he kept staring at Carlos's plate of steak and mushrooms instead. "Do you?"

"Normally I bring dinner from home, so I can eat while I'm working."

That just made Cecil confused. "But there's no food or drink allowed around the sensitive equipment."

Carlos smiled his pretty, pretty smile. "You really pay attention, don't you? I guess that's why the others let you hang out in there. Most kids your age wouldn't be grown-up enough."

Cecil was blushing harder than he'd ever blushed in his *whole life*.

"Well, in my personal office, there's no sensitive equipment. Just me and my computer and a whole lot of books. It's where I analyze the data we've collected, or work on papers, or correspond with other scientists."

"Ohhh?" said Cecil, trying to sound like someone with a normal pulse whose palms were not sweating.

"That's right." Carlos stopped talking to cut up his steak, then stopped cutting up his steak to say, "After we're finished eating, do you want to come up and see?"

Cecil had been into some of the other scientists' personal offices before. Lots of them had drawings by their kids on the walls, or fun magnets on their filing cabinets, or interesting astronomical toys sitting on their desks. Not Carlos. His books were all neatly shelved, flat surfaces almost totally clear, and he didn't have any decorations at all, except for a chart on the wall labeled Large Scale Structure in the Local Universe. (It was all colorful dots and lines and numbers, and Cecil didn't understand a jot of it. Scientists were so *smart*.)

Carlos pulled a second chair up next to his own, moved over so he and Cecil could both see the screen of his computer, and opened up a super complicated program that Cecil was totally not qualified to describe.

"Okay, here we go," he finally said, as a big starscape appeared that took up the whole screen. "This is an image from an area of the sky we've been studying since last year. It's in the constellation of Orion. You know your constellations?"

"I don't know all 88 by heart," admitted Cecil. "But I know Orion. Its brightest stars are Rigel and Betelgeuse."

"Impressive." Carlos ruffled Cecil's hair, hand lingering for a moment on the back of his neck. It was nice. Cecil really wished Carlos would hug him or something, but thought it might be rude to ask. "Rigel is right at the bottom of this image. It's actually a total of three stars, but you can only see it as two. This light is Rigel A, and this one is Rigel B."

Cecil didn't know any more facts about Rigel to impress Carlos with, so he just said, "Neat."

"The space we've been observing is right here." Carlos circled an area above Rigel B with his mouse...and, at the same time, put his other hand on Cecil's bare knee. "I'm going to start playing the animation now. Watch that spot closely, okay?"

So Cecil didn't have time to focus on Carlos's touch, because he had important science to watch.

Sure enough, a couple seconds into the animation, a brand-new light appeared. Tiny, like a baby star -- and gone a moment later. Cecil caught his breath, riveted, waiting for it to reappear. Then it did -- but in a different spot.

"Is that one thing moving around?" he whispered. "Or is there more than one?"

"Shhh." Carlos squeezed his leg, fingers soft against the inside of his thigh. "Keep watching."

Like anything could have stopped Cecil at that point. He watched all through the whole animation, a year's worth of data time-lapsed into just a few minutes, and counted half a dozen more of the flickering starry lights. "What *are* they, Carlos? Pulsars? Quasars?"

"We have no idea."

Cecil couldn't keep from bouncing in his seat with frustration. "None at *all?*"

"You said yourself that you like objects we don't understand," Carlos reminded him. "And at this point, we don't understand anything at all about the lights above Rigel B. You should be thanking me right now."

He smiled to show he wasn't really mad, but Cecil was embarrassed anyway. "Thank you, Carlos."

"That's a good boy." Carlos patted Cecil's leg before taking his hand away, leaving a strange, breathless tingling sensation where his fingers had touched. "If we figure out anything about them, I promise, I'll make sure you're one of the first to know."

That one day gave Cecil enough happy memories that he could have lived off them for weeks and weeks. And it didn't even stop! Because from then on, every day when both Carlos and Cecil were at the observatory, Carlos made sure to at least say hi to him. Usually Carlos also ruffled his hair or patted his shoulder. They had dinner together in the cafeteria a couple of times, and one time Carlos bought Cecil a cookie, and another time a whole slice of pie. His treat, he said.

When Carlos was working with one of the telescopes, or the machines out in the main lab, he always took the time to tell Cecil what he was doing. If he was in his office he was probably too busy to be disturbed, but even then sometimes he invited Cecil in, and showed him Doppler shifts or infrared imaging or more time-lapse photography of the sky.

His hand usually rested on Cecil's leg, then. Or slid down his spine to pause at the small of his back.

Some of Carlos's touches felt different than others, but Cecil didn't know how to explain it. And he didn't want to sound like he was complaining -- all this time he'd been longing to cuddle with Carlos, and any kind of touching was *like* cuddling, right?

Besides, it felt weird sometimes, but not *bad*. Of course not. Kind and gentle Carlos would never do anything bad to him.

Cecil had left Carlos's office briefly to run to the bathroom, and when he got back, he heard someone else inside talking. He didn't want to interrupt, so he waited politely outside the door.

"Do you need us to do a better job distracting him?" asked the someone-else, a voice Cecil recognized as his *least* favorite of the astronomers.

"Steve, relax," said sensible, reasonable Carlos. "It's fine, he's not bothering me. He only comes in when I invite him."

Were they talking about Cecil?

"Since when do you invite him anywhere?" said Steve. "I thought you hated kids. Won't do outreach with the local grade schools, won't lead tours when the Boy Scouts come around...and it used to be we couldn't get Cecil away from you fast enough."

They *were* talking about Cecil.

Carlos sighed. "I don't hate kids. I just prefer not to work with kids. This one has...grown on me, that's all. A single exception does not, scientifically speaking, invalidate a trend."

"Fair enough. But look, if he ends up having another meltdown because you got new glasses or something and you need backup, you know where to find me."

Cecil's face got hot, and not in the embarrassed-but-exciting way it did when Carlos said something nice about him. Sure, okay, he got really upset one time when Carlos had gotten a haircut and it was *awful*, but he was only nine back then! He was a lot more grown up now! Where did Steve Carlsberg get the nerve?

...Did Carlos really used to tell the other scientists to keep Cecil away from him?

Steve strode out of Carlos's office and went off down the hall in the other direction, not even noticing Cecil. Good. Now if only Cecil could disappear out of the whole building without anyone noticing, and run off home to be alone with his shame...but his backpack was still in Carlos's office, with his homework and his bus pass and everything. He had to go get it first.

He took a big deep breath and made himself go in.

"There you are," said Carlos. "Come on over. I found some Hubble images I think you're going to like."

Cecil swallowed. "Carlos? Did I used to bother you?"

Carlos's face fell. "You were listening? No, Cecil, don't let that get to you. You can't pay attention to anything Steve Carlsberg says."

"But I did, didn't I? And you only started putting up with me after you took me home...." His backpack was sitting right next to the desk, and he didn't want to go any closer, so he stopped in the middle of the office and sniffled. "Is it because you feel sorry for me?"

"Aw, Cecil, it's not like that at all. Stay right there." Carlos got up and came past him to shut the door, turning a lock Cecil hadn't noticed was there. "Okay. Now you come here and sit down."

He put an arm around Cecil's shoulders, and with a startling amount of force guided Cecil back to the desks. Carlos sat in his usual chair, but when Cecil tried to take the other one like always, Carlos lifted him off the ground and hauled Cecil right into his lap -- one arm curled around Cecil's back, and the other held firmly across his legs.

"I don't feel sorry for you," said Carlos in a low voice. "You have to look out for yourself a lot, right? Because your mom isn't very good at taking care of you right now? Well, I think that's very impressive. You impress me, Cecil."

"Really?" sniffed Cecil. Carlos's face was just a few inches away from his.

"Really. And I bet you keep a lot of secrets for her too, don't you? To keep her from getting in trouble?"

"Uh-huh." Mom was really great most of the time, but sometimes she needed a little help. And most people just wouldn't understand her. Cecil's brother understood but wasn't good at listening, so it was up to Cecil to figure out that things like *beware, be warned, be wary* meant *Cecil, darling, I'm going to need you to forge my signature on the electric bill again, because this month I'm afraid of writing utensils.*

"That's impressive too. You take such good care of her. You're good at keeping secrets, huh, sweetheart?"

"Mmhmm."

"Do you think you could keep a secret for me?"

Cecil nodded. Of course he could. Anything for Carlos.

"Good. That's good." The arm around Cecil's back moved upward, so Carlos was caressing the back of his neck, fingers ruffling through his hair. "You see...part of what Steve said is true. I used to ask the other scientists to keep you busy when I was around. But the secret is that it was never because you bothered me."

Cecil didn't understand.

"They wouldn't like it if they knew the truth. They might tease me. So it has to be our little secret, okay? You can't tell anyone."

"O-okay," gulped Cecil, though he still didn't see....

That was when Carlos kissed him.

Just once. Just gently. *On the mouth.*

Cecil squeaked in surprise, feeling fluttery and unsteady through his whole body, like a treetop rattled in a strong wind. He was hot all over -- especially his face, especially his mouth -- head swimming, heart thumping like it wanted to knock itself right out of his chest. Only Carlos's strong arms held him in place, Carlos's hand cupping the back of his head to keep him steady.

At last Carlos pulled their lips apart, leaving Cecil breathless and dazed and shivering in astonishment. "The truth is that I like you," he murmured into Cecil's ear, the air from his lungs hot against Cecil's skin. "I like you a lot."

"I -- I want a hug," blurted Cecil. He was having so many *feelings* and they scared him, with the way they felt too big for his body, like they might blow him apart at the seams any second.

"Shhh." Carlos pulled him into a tight, comforting embrace. He was so big and strong and solid, and Cecil clung to him, feeling like maybe everything would be okay if Carlos could just hold him like this and never ever let go. "Of course you can have a hug. You're such a good boy, Cecil. A sweet, cooperative boy like you deserves all the hugs in the world."

Touch

Cecil had bad dreams all that night. One time his brother threw a shoe at him and told him to shut up. He would have thought that was a dream too, except the shoe was still there when he woke up.

Mom had covered all the mirrors again this week, but Cecil wanted to be extra sure he looked okay, so he risked uncovering the one in the bathroom and checking before he ran to catch the bus. He fidgeted all through school, had to guess about most of the answers on his history test, and was so nervous taking the 17 to the observatory that the person in front of him yelled at him to stop kicking the seat.

All that, and when he got to the observatory Carlos was in some kind of meeting anyway.

One of the other scientists, Diane Craton, let Cecil sit in her cubicle for a while and look at her spectroscopic analysis of asteroids. Finally the meeting was over, and Carlos and a couple of other scientists came out into the main work area, arguing with each other under their breaths.

Cecil was trying to decide whether to get up when Diane put her hand on his shoulder. "I don't think you should distract Dr. Menendez today, honey. There's some kind of funding issue going on, and those always put him in a mood."

"If he's in a bad mood, maybe he wants to be distracted," said Cecil hopefully, as Carlos disappeared into his office. "I could be a *good* distraction. He...he doesn't not-like me."

That was such a careful way to say it that it wouldn't get Carlos made fun of, right?

"Well, I'll call him," said Diane. "But don't be too disappointed if he's busy, okay?"

"Uh-huh."

So she dialed Carlos's extension on her desk phone. "Carlos? It's Diane. No, nothing new on the mineral analysis...I just have Cecil with me here, and we were wondering if you could be interrupted any time soon...." She nodded, listening, covered the mouthpiece and whispered to Cecil, "You can sit quietly and do your homework, right?"

"Yes!" whispered Cecil back, excited.

"All right. He says he can. And if you need to focus, you send him right back out here, I'll be here all evening. Great! He'll be right over." She hung up and gave Cecil an encouraging smile. "All right, go on in. Just remember to be extra nice to him today."

Cecil was already grabbing his backpack. He could definitely be extra nice for Carlos.

The door of Carlos's office was shut but unlocked. Carlos spun in his desk chair and smiled when Cecil came in. "Hey, Cecil. It's been a hell of a day. I'm glad you're here. Lock that

door."

Obediently, Cecil turned the lock and let Carlos beckon him over. He got scooped up into Carlos's lap right away this time, legs spread so his knees were on either side of Carlos's waist, and before doing anything else Carlos hugged him close. Cecil arched his back so he could press himself against Carlos's broad chest -- it was awkward but nice, when his head could rest on Carlos's shoulder with Carlos's soft hair fluffy against his cheek.

"You really like being touched, don't you, Cecil?" asked Carlos. One arm was low around Cecil's back, gripping him by the hip, while the other curved up to caress his shoulders.

Was Cecil being too clingy? He couldn't tell if Carlos was being critical or just making a scientifically neutral observation. "O-only if you want to," he stammered.

This time he could hear the smile in Carlos's voice. "Oh, you precious little creature, you have no idea."

Cecil jumped as Carlos kissed his neck. It felt...good? It also felt like the scary, overwhelming too-much-feeling from yesterday, except not as scary. Not this time. Gentle Carlos.

"Just spent about an hour fighting with the NSF over whether they're going to cut our grants next year," said Carlos, rubbing his fingers in smooth circles against Cecil's back. "You know what the NSF is?"

"The National Science Foundation?"

"That's them. And we still don't know what they're going to do, because the whole thing has to run through some approvals process...I tried to be very nice and polite with them, stay focused on our objectives and the kind of money we realistically need, but by the end of it all I couldn't stop thinking, *fuck, I hope Cecil's here today. I can't wait to get him in a locked room and make him squirm a little.*"

That had Cecil squirming, all right. "Carlos!" he hissed, scandalized. Dirty words sounded so much dirtier in Carlos's beautiful oaky voice.

Carlos laughed, a warm, pumpkin-bread sound. "It's your own fault, you know. I try to resist, but you get so cute when you're being teased, I can't help myself."

That made Cecil feel a little better. It was different if Carlos couldn't stop himself. Plus..."I -- I like it when you say I'm cute."

"You like that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, you know, a big part of being a scientist is testing things, so I should test this." Carlos took Cecil by the shoulders and pushed him carefully out of the hug, so he was sitting back on Carlos's thighs and looking into Carlos's strong-jawed face. "You're cute, Cecil. You're adorable."

Cecil turned away, face heating up, too shy to meet Carlos's eyes.

"I like your cute little feet." Both of Carlos's hands fell to Cecil's ankles, wrapping around them for just a second. "I like your cute skinny legs." The fingers traced light paths along the outside of his calves, the bends of his knees, and his thighs -- right up to the hem of his shorts, and even going a little bit under them. "I *really* like your cute, pert little ass."

He put both hands right on Cecil's butt and *squeezed*. Cecil jumped again, covering his mouth to muffle a yelp. When he was really little Mom used to spank him for being bad, but that was years and years ago, and Carlos's touch didn't feel the same at *all*.

"Keep extra-quiet about that part," added Carlos in a low voice. "Other people wouldn't understand."

"Our little secret," whispered Cecil through his fingers.

Carlos grinned, and everything about it was dazzling. "That's my sweet, smart boy." He moved up to set his hands on Cecil's waist, which was better, except that they were under Cecil's T-shirt which meant thumbs against his bare stomach right where he was ticklish. "Your soft little stomach is cute too."

He curled his fingers around Cecil's wrists, pulling them gently away from his face.

"Your small, delicate hands are cute. Your slender arms when they reach out for hugs are cute."

He cupped Cecil's chin, fingers weaving through Cecil's hair, one thumb running along Cecil's bottom lip.

"Your messy hair is cute. Your big innocent eyes are cute. The freckles on your nose are cute. And your sweet little mouth is cutest of all."

Cecil's mouth was hanging open now, gasping for breath. Carlos's hands might be holding his head but it still felt like they were touching him all over, making him shiver wherever they brushed his skin, sending strange hot feelings coiling around in his body like snakes. Normally Cecil thought snakes were fun, but normally they were outside him.

"Yeah, you like that," said Carlos, in almost a purr, like he had just eaten something delicious. "Hypothesis confirmed. Oh, you little...you're really panting for it, aren't you?"

For the touching? For the praise? For something else? Did he mean to say *because of* and not *for*? Cecil didn't know, and he couldn't think straight enough to ask. His mind was all foggy. When he tried to say something, it came out as a weak, wordless moan.

"Shhh." Carlos pulled him forward again. "I got you. I'm gonna take real good care of you."

He kissed Cecil, this time with lips parted, so his tongue could push its way into Cecil's mouth. The hands cupping Cecil's face kept his head still while Carlos filled him up, but the rest of his body went all weak like jelly, and he fell limp against Carlos's chest...with the crook of one thigh resting against something hot and heavy that had risen up in the front of

Carlos's pants. It was Carlos doing all the moving: his hips rolling lightly under Cecil, while his tongue caressed the inside of Cecil's mouth like it belonged there, like it was making itself comfortable to stay inside him for a good long time.

Everything sort of greyed out then. It was all too much -- the heat, the fear, the firm touches, the electric sensation -- so all the feelings blurred together into a kind of humming static. His vision went fuzzy -- there was some kind of flickering in the corner of his eye.

When Carlos let him go, Cecil collapsed the rest of the way, burying his face in the crook of Carlos's neck. It helped. Carlos hugged him again -- loving, protective Carlos -- and that helped too.

He didn't realize he was still making noises until Carlos murmured, "I take it back. The cutest thing of all about you is your voice."

(Interlude: Carlos)

Chapter Summary

Specific warnings for this chapter: abuser POV, including fantasies of underage non-con.

In the dead of night, as always, Carlos parked in the lot next to his apartment complex and rode up to his floor. The hallways were dim and quiet by the time he got home from work. Just the way he liked it.

Especially after a day that involved *grinding* against the lithe little body of Cecil Palmer, holy *fuck*.

Carlos had never been bothered by what he was. He wasn't stupid, either -- he knew that if he acted on his desires and got caught, it was a straight ticket to life in prison and the end of any career he ever hoped for -- so he watched a lot of animated porn, and stayed away from situations that would put him in contact with real-life prepubescent boys. Then the most delectable boy he could imagine became a regular fixture at his workplace, latched onto him with a starry-eyed child's crush, and turned out to have effectively zero parental supervision. What the fuck was Carlos supposed to do?

He dropped his bag the instant he got in the door, and had his cock out of his pants before he was halfway to the bedroom. Hadn't coaxed Cecil into doing this for him yet, but at the rate they were going it was only a matter of time. Sweet little boy willingly swallowed every line Carlos fed him about this being perfectly normal, somehow top-secret, and mostly his own fault.

It wasn't the only thing Carlos was going to make him swallow. *Unf.*

Carlos toppled backward into bed and rocked his hips up into his fist, thinking about how small Cecil would look kneeling in front of him, how wide-eyed and flustered when first pulled against his flushed-dark cock. Small hands would have to wrap around the base, rosy lips would be forced wide open around the head, and Cecil's darling moans would be muffled as he sucked just like Carlos told him to, like the good cooperative boy he was.

He would squeal when Carlos first came down his throat, but he would take it, oh yes, because once you agree to suck someone's cock then you *have* to swallow. Otherwise it just makes a mess, and it would be all your fault, and you wouldn't do that, would you, sweetheart? No, of course not, now take it, that's right, oh fuck, take it all.

Cecil craved praise so bad. He was like a plant that had been shut in a cupboard, desperate for sunlight. The slightest hints of potential disapproval were enough to keep him in line, and

when you mixed in plenty of reassurance about how Carlos liked him and was proud of him, he was deliciously responsive.

But oh, if he had been a different sort of child, how Carlos would have loved to shame him. How sweet it would be in a different way if he could have Cecil pinned down, maybe on this very bed, squirming and begging as Carlos fingered him but not fighting back nearly as much as he could have. *Carlos, please, it hurts--*

That's right, sweetheart. Remember what I said?

Th-that I'm being punished?

Mmhmm. And why do you deserve to be punished?

Because I -- I was bad, Carlos, I was a filthy little cock-tease and now you need to teach me a lesson--

The fantasy stuck on that moment, with the real Carlos's hips snapping up and down to the vision of Cecil writhing and moaning, to the imagined sound of Cecil crying out in pain and pleasure -- until with a gasp he came all over his hand, the shockwaves hitting his body better than anything he'd felt in, fuck, how long? Years? Way too long, was the point.

Carlos flung one arm over his face -- purely out of habit, he hadn't even turned on the lights in here -- and breathed hard through the aftershocks. So goddamn good.

He couldn't wait for his next opportunity to touch this child in real life. Cecil was a precious treasure, and thought Carlos still planned to be as cautious as possible, he was absolutely prepared to take some risks in the process of tapping that.

Ice Cream

Cecil had seen the White Sands Ice Cream Shop across the street from the observatory, but had never gone in before now. It was *beautiful*. All bright colors and cool artsy furniture and pretty lights.

He ran ahead of Carlos over to the display case with the flavors and toppings, and pressed his face against the glass. Fruit and nuts and chocolate and other candies, enough to make his mouth water just looking at them. "How many can I have, Carlos?"

"Depends. How many do you want?"

"All of them!"

"Well, you can't have that," said Carlos. "You'll get a stomachache."

"That's only a hypothesis!" protested Cecil. "You won't know for sure unless you test it. With multiple trials!"

"Smart-aleck." Carlos ruffled his hair, mussing it up. "That's true. But it's also true that you can only run an experiment if you can find somebody's willing to fund you." He held up his credit card. "And I'm only approving a grant for three toppings at most. So pick your favorites."

Cecil pouted, just a little, but by the time they got to the front of the line he had picked kiwi, almonds, and gummy bears. He couldn't decide between kiwi and strawberries, so Carlos offered to get strawberries on his, and they could share.

"And use a fresh scoop!" called Carlos to the lady behind the counter. "I see orange ice cream in there, and he's allergic."

The lady at the register who was ringing them up got worried. "Is he okay to be in here at all? Our equipment is clean and all, but I know some kids are awful sensitive...."

"He's okay with smelling citrus," Carlos assured her. He had offered to buy Cecil lemonade one time, so Cecil had explained all this. "He can probably even ingest a tiny bit without a reaction, but, you know, better safe than sorry."

"One time in class Maureen Peters brought in cookies made with orange peel and didn't say so, and I ate one by accident and my face swelled up and my tongue turned purple and I had to stay in the nurse's office all day," put in Cecil.

"Oh my." The woman at the register looked very impressed. "Well, we will certainly use a fresh scoop for you, sugarplum."

Cecil was distracted by watching the other woman make their ice cream while Carlos paid. He was already down at the other end of the counter when she finished, and she handed him

his two scoops of Oreo ice cream with a wink. "Threw in an extra spoonful of gummy bears, just for you," she told him. "You and your dad are just the cutest thing."

Cecil jumped. "Carlos isn't my dad!"

He regretted it instantly, because the lady looked worried. "He isn't...? Who is he, honey?"

"I take care of him sometimes when his mom's busy," answered Carlos from behind him, not sounding worried at all. "Single mother, raising two boys on her own, you know how it is -- I try to do what I can."

"Oh, I see! That's mighty kind of you." The lady handed Carlos his cup of French vanilla, and said to Cecil, "Your mom works extra hard, so be good for her and Mr. Carlos, okay?"

Cecil sat down on one of the fancy chairs at an artsy table, feeling sort of tangled-up and upset. Even having the ice cream didn't help. Until Carlos sat next to him. "That woman doesn't need to remind you to be good," he said quietly. "You know how to be good, and you do it fine all on your own."

Cecil knew he wasn't allowed to cuddle with Carlos in public, but he couldn't help leaning in Carlos's comforting direction. "Thank you, Carlos."

"Sit up straight, sweetheart," said Carlos, but he still plucked a strawberry off his ice cream and put it on top of Cecil's.

The sugar rush wore off in the middle of Cecil doing his English homework, leaving him nodding off in his chair, vocabulary words blurring together in front of his eyes.

Carlos was doing serious science work, so he didn't notice until Cecil almost fell over. "Whoa there," he said, holding an arm in front of Cecil and catching Cecil's chin in his hand. "What's wrong, Cecil?"

"'m sleepy," said Cecil sleepily.

"Is that all? Guess you're all worn out, huh. Stay here."

He left the office for a few minutes. Cecil leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes and listening to the muffled tones of Carlos's caramel voice talking to Susan Wilman, the scientist who had her office across the hall.

When Carlos returned, his arms were full, and he locked the door behind him. "I asked Dr. Wilman if you could have a nap on her couch," he explained. "Turns out she's about to leave for a meeting...so she let me borrow the cushions. Come on, little boy, let's get you lying down."

He lined up the cushions in a row on the biggest stretch of bare floor in the office, between the far window and the filing cabinet, with shelves nailed to the wall overhead. Cecil put his homework muzzily on a corner of Carlos's desk and went over. His eyelids fluttered as he curled up on his side.

Carlos got one of his extra lab coats from a hook by the door and tucked it over Cecil like a light blanket. "Talk about luck," he said, kneeling on the carpet beside Cecil and resting his hand on Cecil's waist. "I've been wanting to see you like this, you know."

"Hmm?"

"Laid out like this. Tired. Your pretty eyes all...glazed over." He caressed Cecil's side in long, slow strokes, all the way down to the top of Cecil's leg. "You didn't guess, did you? You're not doing this on purpose."

Cecil shook his head. He was happy Carlos liked it, but still..."Real sleepy."

Carlos sucked in a sharp breath, and let it out slow. "Yeah, you are," he said, in that low, rough voice he got sometimes. "Roll over for me."

He pushed Cecil onto his back, then swung one knee over Cecil's body, so now he was straddling Cecil's legs. The light from the window shone behind his head, with Cecil lying almost totally in his shadow. Tall, imposing Carlos.

He only had to bend a little to cup Cecil's face in his hands; his thumb rubbed across Cecil's bottom lip. Cecil hadn't realized his lips were slightly parted until Carlos's thumb dipped all the way into his mouth, pressing against his tongue.

"Mnh," mumbled Cecil around the intrusion. Not upset, just confused.

"Yeah, that's right. You don't mind, do you? Don't mind that at all."

No, Cecil didn't mind. Should he? Carlos tasted of salt and smelled like lavender hand lotion. It wasn't bad.

Carlos bent lower, thumb sliding out of Cecil's mouth, tracing a damp line on Cecil's chin. "Put your arms around my neck, that's my good boy."

Cecil pulled his arms out from under the soft fabric of the lab coat and wound them obediently around Carlos's neck, letting his fingers tangle in Carlos's perfect hair.

He was too tired to do much else, so Carlos took care of the rest. All Cecil had to do was hang on to Carlos and lie still, while Carlos held up his own weight on his elbows and pressed Cecil down with deep, hungry kisses. His tongue tasted like vanilla and strawberry as it plunged into Cecil's mouth.

The sensation left Cecil dizzy, but he was expecting that by now. It wasn't scary or overwhelming this time.

Until Cecil let his eyes fall closed.

He knew he still had to be on the cushions, but all of a sudden the static was making his head spin so bad he hardly felt it. He might as well have been falling through the void -- his limbs felt weak and heavy -- Carlos was there to anchor him, and Carlos knew all the stars even out here, but Cecil didn't know where they were going and he was scared, he was scared --

Eyes open, he saw Carlos's office around him, but it was blurry and unsteady and there was a flickering in the corner of his eye --

Carlos's hips rolled against Cecil's body, grinding that heated hardness in his pants against Cecil's thigh. The shock made Cecil jerk and struggle, letting out a choked squeak.

"Shh, shh, shh." Carlos clamped a hand over Cecil's mouth, holding Cecil's jaw closed. "It's okay, sweetheart. Nothing to be afraid of -- but you have to be quiet, understand? Your pretty voice could get me in so much trouble right now. Can you do that, hmm? Can you be quiet for me?"

Shivering, Cecil nodded.

Carlos kissed him on the forehead and slid the hand away from his mouth. "That's my sweet boy. You're still sleepy, aren't you? Were you nodding off on me there?"

Maybe? Cecil wasn't sure. His arms were still around Carlos's neck, so he tugged Carlos down to whisper in his ear: "What's..."

All the vocabulary words and science terms Cecil knew didn't cover this. Instead, he nudged between Carlos's legs with his knee -- as lightly as he could, though Carlos gasped anyway, like maybe it hurt.

"...what's that?"

"Fuck, Cecil," breathed Carlos. "It's never gonna go away now."

Cecil tried to shrink into the cushions, face hot and flushed. "S-sorry!"

"It's all right. I can still take care of it. Scientifically speaking, it's called an *erection* -- if anyone asks, I'm not the one who taught you that. Just being around you makes it happen sometimes. And you're so cute, that only makes it worse."

"Does it...hurt?"

"No, shh, no. Feels good. Keep this secret, sweetheart, and maybe someday I'll show you how good it feels. It's -- it's really fucking distracting, that's all."

Cecil's whole body was flooded with heat by now: shame, confusion, other feelings he didn't understand.

"Hey now. I told you I'd take care of it." Carlos kissed the corner of Cecil's mouth. "Hold still, and don't make a sound. It'll only take a minute or two, and I'll let you get that nap you need right afterward."

He sat up on his elbows, looking around the room as if trying to find something, then added, mostly to himself:

"What the hell, I've got too many extra lab coats anyway."

Cecil wasn't totally sure what happened next. He heard the zipper of Carlos's jeans tugged down; he felt Carlos gather up a handful of the white fabric lying between them; and then it was all Carlos's body rocking in rhythmic jerks on top of his, steady at first, then faster, faster. Carlos's face was tucked against Cecil's neck for most of it, panting hot on his skin, so Cecil nuzzled into Carlos's perfect soft curls and tried not to think about anything else.

Going-Away Gifts

Cecil couldn't concentrate all day on the day after he had a nap in Carlos's office, when Carlos ruined his lab coat. He thought maybe he didn't sleep right. Or maybe it was the fight with his brother at breakfast, about who got to eat the last of the Flaky-O's. Ugh, *brothers*.

He went to the observatory after school like always, but the door of Carlos's office was closed. Cecil stood outside it for a minute, clutching the straps of his backpack and trying to hear if Carlos was inside. He could sort of hear some noises. Was it okay to knock?

Finally he knocked, and Carlos came to the door. "Hello?--Oh, Cecil! I'm sorry, you can't come in right now. I'm in a conference call with a colleague from Italy, and, with the time difference, it's already a lot later than she wanted to stay up."

"I'd be quiet!" said Cecil. He could work off in a corner, he could be good and polite and stay out of the way. He knew how not to interrupt when grown-ups were working.

Carlos lowered his voice. "Yeah, I know that, but she doesn't." He ruffled Cecil's hair. "If you go work in the computer lab, I'll come find you when I'm done, okay?"

Cecil knew what the right answer was, even if he didn't like it. "Okay."

He trudged off to the computer lab, miserable and hurt. All the other scientists at the observatory knew he was allowed in Carlos's office, and that he could be not-distracting no matter how busy Carlos got. That wasn't part of their little secret. So why couldn't Carlos say all that about Cecil to the woman from Italy?

There was only one other person working on the computers, and if Carlos hadn't specifically told Cecil to stay here, Cecil would have turned right around and gone anywhere else. Since he was stuck here, he went and found a chair in the farthest possible corner of the room from Steve Carlsberg.

It didn't work. Steve followed him over. "Hey there, little guy. You got some good homework there?"

Cecil shrugged one shoulder. Maybe if he looked really not interested, Steve would go away. "It's just homework."

"Sure is, buddy. Say, how about when you're done with that, you and me go take a look at some simulations of--"

"No."

"Are you sure? You didn't even hear what--"

"I'm waiting for Carlos."

"That might be a while, kiddo. See, Dr. Menendez is working on a big complicated paper for a super important conference right now, so--"

"I need to do my homework," said Cecil, and got out his math book and ignored Steve until *finally* Steve left him alone.

It was almost a whole hour later when Carlos came and got him. As soon as they were safely back in Carlos's office, he gave Cecil a warm hug. "Thanks for waiting. Come on in."

Cecil held on tight to Carlos's shirt, pressing his face into Carlos's broad, comforting chest. "I had to spend a *whole hour* with *Steve Carlsberg*."

"Did you? Sorry, sweetheart, I didn't know he would be there. Let me make it up to you. Do you want to sit on my lap while I work for a while?"

Cecil did. But. "If I do...will you get a..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "...an erection?"

"Aw, Cecil." Carlos kissed the crown of his head. "It's nothing to be scared of...but it won't happen if you hold real still. Can you do that for me?"

"Uh-huh!"

Carlos sat in his computer chair, and Cecil sat on one of his legs, feet dangling on either side of Carlos's calf. The position meant Carlos had to wrap one arm around Cecil just in order to type. And when Carlos stopped to read something, he would curve his hand around Cecil's stomach, or rest it on Cecil's thigh. Cecil couldn't even *remember* the last time someone had held him this long.

Every time he wanted to fidget or wriggle around, he remembered what Carlos said, and held extra still. He was sitting right up next to Carlos's hips, so he could feel that it was working.

After a while Carlos said, "All right, you're going to have to switch sides." When Cecil froze up, scared that he'd done something wrong, Carlos added, "It's okay, sweetheart, you're fine. My leg's falling asleep, that's all. And I could do with a break."

Cecil moved over. Carlos arranged him so he was sitting sideways now, the better to give him a light, open-mouthed kiss. It gave Cecil that squirming hot pile-of-snakes feeling on the inside again, but maybe that was just embarrassment? Because of how Carlos liked him so much?

He let Carlos finish kissing him, then put his arms around Carlos's neck. Carlos smiled and petted his hair, talking quietly: "There's something I have to tell you. I have a big conference to go to next week...so I'm going to be leaving town on Thursday."

Now Cecil just felt cold inside. "You're going away?"

"Just until the next Tuesday. And you wouldn't have come in on the weekend anyway. I'll be back before you know it." With his other hand Carlos tugged up Cecil's shirt, just enough to rest it right on his side, warm against his bare skin. "Although I'm going to be missing my cute Cecil every minute. So when I get back, I want you to think of something extra-special we can do to celebrate, okay?"

"Uh-huh," said Cecil, trying very hard not to squirm. He was ticklish, but he was supposed to be holding still. "Can we -- would you--?"

"Don't be afraid to ask," said Carlos. "I might not be able to do it, but it's okay for you to ask anything."

Nobody had ever said anything like that to Cecil before. He wasn't even sure he believed it from Carlos. But he made himself be brave. "Can we -- go see a movie?"

"A movie? Like in a theater?"

"Please? I've never seen a movie in a theater."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," said Carlos. "You remember how the woman at the ice cream shop got worried when she found out I wasn't your dad? If we start going to movies, more people might ask questions like that, and they might start asking about your mom. You don't want that."

Cecil shivered. He sure didn't. But it gave him an idea. "What if I *pretended* you were my dad? So people wouldn't think it was weird, or ask other questions?"

"Mmm." Carlos licked his lips (maybe they were dry?) and smiled at Cecil. His hand moved down over the waistband of Cecil's shorts, feeling almost warmer than before, even with denim and cotton between Carlos's touch and Cecil's...*cute, pert little ass*. "Would you do that for me, sweetheart? Call me Daddy, huh? Be Daddy's good little boy?"

His rich caramel voice was making Cecil blush harder than ever. "Uh-huh."

"Well, it's a cute thought." Carlos petted Cecil's hair some more, all soft and gentle. "But what if someone I knew saw us? I'd have to explain why I never told them I had a son, and why they've never seen you before...or, if it was one of the other scientists here, I'd have to explain why I spent a year not talking to you...it would get to be too big a lie. I can't make you keep up with that."

Of course he couldn't. Cecil should have thought of that. Maybe Cecil didn't know a lot of people except his teachers and the scientists, but a smart, beautiful man like Carlos probably had hundreds of friends. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," said Carlos. "Everyone has bad ideas sometimes. Bad ideas are an important part of science."

"Uh-huh," said Cecil miserably.

"Shh, shh, don't be sad. How about this: Instead of going to a theater, you come over to my apartment, and we have our own little movie night, just the two of us. I'll make popcorn, and maybe some other snacks, and you can pick out anything you want on all of Netflix."

Cecil was awestruck. "You really mean it?"

"I really mean it. The whole time I'm away, I'll be looking forward to it."

Cecil almost didn't want to go to the observatory on Wednesday. Because it would mean he had to say goodbye, and maybe if he didn't do that, he could pretend Carlos wasn't really leaving.

He ended up being really glad he went. Even though Carlos had to work extra hard all afternoon, so Cecil couldn't sit on his lap at all. Because at the end of the work day Carlos turned his chair toward Cecil's and said, "I got you a present, to keep your spirits up while I'm away. First, since I won't be able to buy you any treats at dinner...."

He got an envelope out of his desk, and gave it to Cecil. When Cecil opened it up, he found a coupon for Big Rico's Pizza -- for two large pizzas with breadsticks, only $19.99 -- *and* a whole twenty-five dollars to pay for it.

"And second...."

Cecil's eyes widened. "There's *more?*"

"What can I say? You get even cuter than usual when you're excited." Carlos winked. "Almost as cute as you get when you're being teased."

Cecil blushed, mostly grateful. Of course he would rather get presents than be teased, but it would be rude and demanding to say so. Especially when Carlos was being *so* generous.

And now Carlos was getting out a paper grocery bag from next to his desk. Was that for *Cecil?* It didn't look heavy, but whatever was in it was awfully big. "You might be a little too grown-up for something like this. Don't take it if you don't want it, okay?"

Of course Cecil would want it, no matter what it was, because it came from Carlos--

He unfolded the top of the bag, and pulled out--

A dog? No, a wolf! No -- Cecil lifted the stuffed animal all the way out of the bag. It was soft and grey and cuddly in his hands, and it had *eight legs* -- just like the one on the T-shirt he wore sometimes, that he didn't even know Carlos had noticed. "You got me a spiderwolf!"

"Sure did. You like him?"

"He's the *greatest!*" Cecil hugged the spiderwolf tight, then jumped out of his chair to throw his arms around Carlos, squashing his new present between them both. "Thank you *so much!*"

"Mmmmm." Carlos returned the hug, one hand ending up on Cecil's butt again, the other bunching up the shirt at the small of his back. "Just remember this while I'm gone, all right? Remember that I'm always looking out for you, and that I like doing good things for you. My precious Cecil. I'll see you next week."

Sharing

Chapter Summary

> Specific warnings for this chapter: Cecil's chaotic home life, parental neglect, physical violence (in the form of ten-year-old boys fighting).

When Cecil got home, his brother was in their bedroom, watching TV.

Cecil put his backpack next to his bed and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Everything was all drippy and there was water on the floor, and when he turned on the faucet he figured out why: it was leaky at the base, so you couldn't run it without spraying all over the place.

And there wasn't any duct tape in the hall closet! "Kevin!" yelled Cecil, while he double-checked behind the glue, the bowl of loose Monopoly pieces, and the intricate miniature house Mom said had to be there. (She wouldn't say why. Last time Cecil asked her about it, she just hissed.) "Did you move the duct tape?"

"Sure did!" called his brother. "It's in the kitchen. That's where the most stuff breaks! It's more productive!"

Cecil stormed back to their room. "But it doesn't *go* it in the kitchen, you *know* -- Get off of that!"

Kevin was looking in *his* backpack, picking up *his* spiderwolf. "But he's so cute! Aren't you going to share? Sharing is important!"

"No!" cried Cecil, running at him. "It's *mine*, it was a *present*, let it go!"

He tackled Kevin onto the carpet and grabbed for the spiderwolf, but they were both about as strong as each other and Kevin bit, so he didn't have the upper hand for long. They wrestled and thrashed, both trying to yell over each other. Cecil got in a couple of good hits, then Kevin managed to knock Cecil's head against the leg of his bed, then there was a sickening *rip* of stitches in cloth--

"Boys! What's going on in here?"

The brothers fell apart. Kevin had a bloody nose; the back of Cecil's skull was throbbing. When Cecil sat up, he found out he had most of the spiderwolf clutched in his arms -- but in Kevin's hand, still trailing stuffing, was one of its legs.

Cecil burst into tears.

"He started it!" cried Kevin, pointing at Cecil while wiping his face on his sleeve. "He jumped on me!"

"He t-took my present!" sobbed Cecil. "And he *r-ruined* it--"

"I didn't mean to!"

"You wreck *everything*, you *m-monster*--"

"It's your fault for not sharing!"

Mom crouched down next to them, where she put one hand on Cecil's forehead and one hand on Kevin's. "No more fighting. Let me see what you did."

In spite of everything, it made Cecil a little relieved how she was using full sentences, and not even the kind about murders and portents that you had to interpret out of Mom-speak. She was having one of her good days. Not perfect -- her hair was still stringy and greasy because she hadn't washed it for a while, and she didn't seem to be noticing what a mess Kevin was -- but no mother is perfect, right? They become perfect when you learn to love them for what they are.

He handed Mom the poor mauled spiderwolf. Kevin handed her the leg.

Their mother studied the pieces for a minute, then said, "This can be fixed."

She picked them up and went out of the room without another word, leaving a bloody Kevin and a sniffling Cecil behind.

Cecil got the duct tape, fixed the faucet, put the tape back in the hall closet, and brushed his teeth. By the time he was done all that, he didn't even want to beat up Kevin any more. He just wanted his present from Carlos back.

The light in the kitchen was flickering, so he went to see if the bulb was broken. The spare bulbs, at least, were still in the closet. Where they *belonged*.

It wasn't the bulb. It was his mother, flicking the light on and off to a rhythm Cecil couldn't hear.

The stuffed spiderwolf was sitting on the kitchen table, still with a torn hole where its leg used to be attached.

"Mom?" asked Cecil. "What are you doing?"

His mother stared vacantly at the wall. "Not now, child. They're listening."

When Cecil had been little, he thought there really were secret police listening to them all the time. Now he understood that this was just Mom's way of saying *I'm not going to fix your present after all. Go to bed.*

She hadn't said to stay out of the room, so Cecil slipped in just long enough to take the spiderwolf back, then left, the light still flickering behind him. His and Kevin's room was dark now, the TV off. If Kevin was asleep Cecil didn't want to wake him up, so he climbed into the bed on his own side of the room, as quietly as possible....

"Did she fix it?" whispered Kevin.

Cecil pulled off his T-shirt and threw it on the floor, but didn't change into pajamas, just hid under the covers in his shorts. "No."

"Well, it wasn't my fault," sulked his brother. "I was being nice. You were being *not cooperative.*"

"You don't know *anything*," hissed Cecil. He was very cooperative! Carlos said so, and Carlos was a lot smarter than any stupid brother. Carlos *praised* him for being so cooperative. The soft, huggable stuffed animal in his arms -- even though it was ripped -- was proof of just how good Carlos thought he was.

(*Carlos* could probably fix the rip.)

Cecil wanted to throw all this in Kevin's face, to show him. But a secret was a secret, and Cecil had promised Carlos he wouldn't tell *anyone*, even know-it-all brothers.

The light in the kitchen, visible through the crack in the door, flicked on and off, on and off.

Carlos probably wasn't even on his plane yet, and Cecil felt like his whole body hurt with how much he wanted Carlos to come back home.

Reunion

After that horrible start, though, the time without Carlos went by fast.

Cecil still went to the observatory after school. He just spent more time in the exhibit halls than way in back where all the scientists worked. One time Steve Carlsberg (ugh) tried to talk to him, explaining that he (Steve) had a kid about Cecil's age, and he could call Cecil's mom and set up a playdate some afternoon, "so you don't have to stay cooped up in here with us boring old grown-ups."

Of course Cecil said no. The words *call your mom* shot the idea dead on arrival, and besides, did Steve think Cecil wasn't smart enough to be interested in their work? Then he got away by saying he had to go see one of the shows in the planetarium. (It was the introduction one, all about the night sky. Cecil could recite some of the parts by heart. During the boring bits, he looked through the stars for Rigel B, and wondered how the lights were doing.)

On the weekend he ordered pizza. Sometimes people on the phone got suspicious at a kid making these orders, and he had to use a cover story, like that his mom had laryngitis and he was talking for her. But as long as he acted like it was normal for him to be calling, people usually went along with it. The people from Big Rico's went along with it.

He even let his brother pick one of the toppings. (Black olives. Kevin thought they were like little pitch-black eyeballs. Cecil thought Kevin was weird and creepy.)

When Monday came around, Cecil went to see the scientists again. Diane Craton was working on a survey of the atmospheres of "hot Jupiter" exoplanets, and Susan Wilman was in her cubicle to argue about a reading they had done. Cecil sat quietly with them and listened, soaking in the data, but also waiting for an opening.

Finally he got a chance to say, "Do either of you know how to fix something if it needs sewing?"

Diane asked what it was, and Cecil pulled the mangled spiderwolf out of his backpack. He had wrapped it carefully in a plastic bag from the supermarket, so it wouldn't lose any more of its stuffing.

"Well, this sure is fancy," said Diane, looking over the seams on the seven legs stupid Kevin hadn't ripped off. "I could sew that back on, but I won't have the exact right colour thread, and the stitches might show. He'll be kind of a Frankenwolf. Is that all right?"

"Uh-huh."

"He's kind of a Frankenwolf already, isn't he?" said Susan. She sounded like she didn't really appreciate how cool spiderwolves were. "Aren't you getting a little old for toys anyway, Cecil?"

"It was a *present*," said Cecil sternly.

"Oh! Sorry, didn't realize."

"Besides, you never get too old for toys," said Diane. "You just change the toys."

Susan thought about that for a second, then laughed. "Oh, you are *bad!*" she cackled, smacking Diane on the shoulder. "Ought to hustle the kid back into Menendez's office, before you make it any more not-safe-for-kids out here."

Cecil held super still and didn't say anything. He wasn't sure if they were fighting-fighting or just play-fighting, so it was safer to stay quiet until he figured out what was going on.

"Don't upset the poor boy, Susan," scolded Diane. "And Carlos is at the Hubble conference right now, you know that. Cecil, honeypie, you bring this little guy back in tomorrow, okay? I'll bring in my sewing kit, take a look at him during dinner, and fix him right up."

The once-more eight-legged spiderwolf sat curled in Cecil's backpack all day on the day Carlos got back from Italy. In class, Cecil kept getting hit with waves of shakiness, making his handwriting go scribbly. Excitement, probably.

As the bus drove toward the observatory, his stomach started to hurt. Because what if Carlos still wasn't there? What if Cecil had gotten the date wrong? What if he had misunderstood everything, and Carlos wasn't coming back at all? What if he was really alone, in an empty universe, and the whole entire world he thought he knew was just his lonely mind playing tricks on itself? What if....

He let himself into the back of the observatory. Carlos's office door was open. And there was Carlos, right there at his desk just like (almost) always.

"Carlos!" squeaked Cecil from the doorway.

Carlos spun his chair around and smiled. "Yes, scientifically speaking, that is who I am."

He even gave Cecil a hug -- just not as long as usual -- right in full view of the hall.

"I'm going to have people in and out all evening, so you're gonna have to sit and do homework for a while," he said, running his hand lightly down the back of Cecil's neck. "But we can have a nice catching-up conversation at dinner, all right? I promise."

And true to his word, a couple hours later he took Cecil down to the observatory cafeteria and they talked. Carlos said his presentation on cosmic expansion went well, and explained some cool new things he had learned about UV spectroscopy of comets. Then he listened, all sympathetic, as Cecil talked about all the things that had sucked while Carlos was away.

Cecil was a little nervous to talk about ripping the toy, even though he put all the blame on Kevin (where it *belonged*). Sure enough, though, Carlos didn't get mad or act like Cecil had let him down. He mostly just wanted to talk about Kevin. "I didn't know you had a brother. Older or younger?"

"Dunno. We're twins, and Mom won't say which of us was first."

Over his plate of falafel, Carlos's eyes glittered. "Twins? I don't suppose you're...identical?"

"Uh-huh. Except he's not like me at *all*."

"Oh, of course not," agreed Carlos. He smiled, slow and warm, though there was still something kinda weird about the look in his eyes. "Even if there are...two of you...with the exact same phenotype...it would be highly scientifically improbable for you *and* the other one to be this cute."

Cecil was still blushing when they went back into the labs, where Carlos set up the big telescope to track a distant galaxy throughout the evening. There were earlier images of the same galaxy on his computer already, and Carlos took Cecil back into his office to show them off. This time he closed and locked the door, so Cecil got to look at the false-colour imaging and spectroscopic readings while sitting on Carlos's lap, with Carlos's arm around his waist.

Not long before he had to leave to catch his bus, Carlos pulled him into a slow kiss.

Cecil was starting to get the hang of tilting his head so their mouths fit together better. Even when he was shaky or whatever, he could do it. Carlos didn't point it out, but when he let Cecil go he smiled in a way that made Cecil think he had noticed, and was proud.

"Are we still on for movie night?" he asked, petting Cecil's leg. "Maybe this Saturday?"

"Uh-huh." Cecil clung to Carlos's shirt. It helped him shiver less. "I can tell Mom I'm visiting a friend. She's okay with me visiting friends. And she's not gonna ask who, or for a number or anything." He probably didn't even need to use the excuse -- Kevin sometimes went to ball games and stuff and didn't tell Mom where he was going at all. But just in case.

"That sounds great, Cecil. Really great." Carlos gave him a nice light kiss on the cheek. "Tell me just one more thing. Is your mom okay with you having sleepovers?"

Sleepover

Chapter Summary

> Specific warnings for this chapter: explicit underage non-con. As always, if you are going to find this triggering or otherwise too upsetting to read, please stop reading now.

With a map drawn on a napkin in his hand and a change of clothes in his backpack, Cecil got off the 27 bus at the Old Town stop and walked half a block to Carlos's apartment complex.

It was *huge*. Came with its own playground, and swimming pool, and even a dog park. Carlos buzzed him in, and Cecil tried not to have his mouth totally hanging open as he rode up to the top floor.

Carlos just had a little single unit. It wasn't like he had a boyfriend or anything. But it was still super posh. "This is *so* cool," said Cecil, gaping around at the hardwood floors and the tall windows and the L-shaped couch and the fancy bookshelves, and how there wasn't scratches or duct tape on *anything*. "Is that a flat-screen TV? Neat! How big is it? Are all those books yours? It looks like *hundreds* of them! How come you have so many clocks on the walls?"

"Big enough. There are at least a few hundred, yeah. Tried to get into the hobby of fixing them a couple years ago, ended up just collecting a bunch of broken ones. At least they make nice scientific-looking decoration, right?" Carlos took Cecil's backpack, and for a second he was holding Cecil in place with it, then he slipped the straps off over Cecil's shoulders. "I'll put this in the closet for you. By the way, that outfit is really cute."

"You like it?" chirped Cecil, spinning around to show him the whole thing. He had borrowed the tunic shirt out of Mom's closet, because she had cooler clothes than he did. It came down almost to the bottom of his shorts, but it had three-quarter-length sleeves so he didn't have to pin them up or anything.

"Sure do." Carlos circled Cecil on his own, and let his hands trail all over the gold embroidery on Cecil's shoulders and chest and upper back.

"You look nice too," added Cecil quickly. Carlos had on a striped shirt and sweatpants, more comfy and relaxed than anything he wore at work, but he looked beautiful in them, obviously. He looked beautiful in *everything*. "You're really...Carlos!" He squirmed, flinching away from Carlos's touch on his stomach. "That tickles!"

"Oh, it does, huh...?" Carlos grinned -- a perfect and nerve-wracking grin -- before throwing his arms around Cecil and digging in his fingers, wriggling them in earnest.

Cecil shrieked with laughter and struggled to get away. At last Carlos let go just enough that he could fling himself out of Carlos's arms. He bolted for the dining room, still giggling as Carlos chased him around the table, and ran out from there into the living room area -- this space was so *big*, it felt like he could run in it *forever*. Around the couch! As long as he didn't let Carlos catch up...!

Except just as he was coming around the far side, Carlos jumped *over* the couch, so Cecil didn't even have time to stop before running right into him. "Gotcha!" laughed Carlos, flipping Cecil over onto the cushions and then landing right on top of him.

There was no *way* Cecil could get away from the merciless tickle attack *now*. He flailed and thrashed, helpless with giggles, having *so* much fun, Carlos's perfect hands all over him--

--and then one of Carlos's hands slipped between his legs, and Cecil jerked like he'd been electrified. That was -- that was *different*. Not good-different. Hot, prickly, funny, uncomfortable different.

But Carlos was still tickling too, which meant Cecil was still squirming and laughing. "C-Carlos, stop!" he choked out -- between giggles -- so Carlos had no way to tell that he was *serious*, that he didn't think he *liked* having Carlos slowly caress the front of his shorts. Even though the way his body was jerking around all on its own meant he was rubbing himself against Carlos's hand--

--Carlos stopped anyway. Stopped tickling, stopped fondling, stopped doing everything, just held Cecil down and smiled broadly while Cecil got a chance to catch his breath and quit shaking. "You are so fucking cute I can't stand it. How did I get this lucky, huh?"

Cecil, already warm from the exertion, flushed even harder.

"Here I am, inviting you in and chasing you all around, and I haven't even offered you a drink yet." Carlos kissed Cecil's heated cheeks, and the corners of his mouth. "Do you want some soda? Then we could play a game, or watch a movie...do you like popcorn? I can make popcorn. Not microwave stuff, either. The serious kind."

All Cecil had ever had was microwave popcorn. "Yes, please! What movies do you have?"

"Everything on Netflix. I'll put the menu on-screen, and you pick something out while I make the snacks, okay?"

"Uh-huh!"

"That's my sweet Cecil." Carlos kissed him one more time, tongue slipping into Cecil's mouth, hand brushing lightly across Cecil's thigh. "Now, where did I leave the remote...?"

At first Cecil looked at what was on Carlos's to-watch list, but it was all super-serious science stuff, so he went through the other categories and picked out a cool-looking old Western. It was in black and white, so at least Carlos would think he was sophisticated.

They sat on the end of the L-shaped couch, where Carlos could put his feet up (they were both barefoot now) and Cecil could sit between his legs and lean back against his chest. They ate out of the same bowl of popcorn. Carlos's other hand kept drifting along Cecil's thigh or dipping under his tunic to stroke his hips: the kind of touching that was still a little weird, but that Cecil was used to by now. It would be silly to all of a sudden start complaining. And it wasn't like it hurt or anything.

Sometimes he could feel Carlos's erection poking against the small of his back. Whenever it came up he held still until it settled down again, and then for as long as he could afterward, until he got excited or forgot.

The movie was *great*. Even if Cecil got really mad at the interviewer character at the end. "How come he isn't printing any of this?" he complained over the credits. "It's the truth! People deserve to know! He's a bad reporter."

"Maybe so, but he's a pretty good storyteller," said Carlos, real quiet, lips right behind Cecil's ear. "And isn't that important too?"

"Not *as* important!"

"Is that so? Then how come you just chose to watch a movie that was a story, instead of one of my documentaries with reporting?"

"Because all the documentaries you had saved were *boring*," said Cecil earnestly.

Carlos's chest shook with laughter.

Cecil fidgeted, suddenly embarrassed. What if he just wasn't smart enough to appreciate a documentary about scatterplot matrices? Or wasn't grown-up enough? Was Carlos laughing *at* him? "But we can watch one if you want! I don't mind! Just let me keep watching stuff with you. I don't care what it is."

"You don't, huh?" Carlos switched off the TV. "Well, right now I don't want to watch anything. Instead, I want to try an experiment. Turn around, okay?"

"Uh-huh." Cecil turned so they were facing each other, still sitting between Carlos's knees.

"That's my precious, cooperative Cecil." Carlos took Cecil's calves, one in each hand, and pulled them forward to circle around his torso. Then he grasped the hem of Cecil's borrowed tunic. "Hold up your arms."

When Cecil did, Carlos pulled the tunic right off over his head. Cecil hugged himself. "How come you...?"

"Because your body is cute." Carlos tossed the tunic over onto the far end of the couch, then cupped Cecil's shoulders and moved the two of them closer together. "Your slender arms and

shoulders are cute. Your bare chest is *really* cute." He kissed Cecil's collarbone, then licked and nuzzled his way down Cecil's chest. "And I have a hypothesis that all of it will get even cuter...."

Holding Cecil in place with a warm hand splayed between his shoulder blades, Carlos traced his way up the inside of Cecil's thigh.

"...once I see just how turned-on I can make you."

Cecil trembled as Carlos started caressing between his legs again, with slow, firm circles that made his head spin. The world felt weird and out-of-focus. "Carlos, I -- I don't--"

"Shh," soothed Carlos. "You're okay. It's not gonna hurt. You can do the same right back to me, see?"

He clasped Cecil's wrist and guided Cecil's hand to the front of his sweatpants.

"That's right. Just like that -- mmm." He was holding Cecil's palm so close that Cecil could feel *everything*, even through the fabric, all hot and firm and *moving*. "You have -- fuck -- th' sweetest little hands. Stay right there."

Cecil stayed. Mostly because he couldn't make himself move. If Carlos's perfect strong legs hadn't been holding him in place, he maybe would have fallen over.

He wanted to struggle, and he wasn't even being tickled into submission this time, but his body felt all limp and heavy and wouldn't respond right. There was a twisting in his stomach, and under that a weird pooling heat, throbbing in time with the renewed motion of Carlos's fingers on his...

...his...

"Feel this?" said Carlos softly into his ear. "Yeah, you feel this. Got a little hard-on of your own going now, don't you?"

Cecil moaned. He couldn't make his voice work; his vision was blurring and tunnelling, with a flickering in the corner of his eyes. What was happening to him?

"You know what that means?"

"I'unno," said Cecil weakly. He felt -- confused, overwhelmed, helpless -- but Carlos would help, right? Carlos was smart. He understood. He would explain everything.

Carlos's voice was smooth and rich and caramel and soaked right down into Cecil's bones. "It means your body likes this, Cecil."

It did...?

Cecil's body was feeling less and less like *his* every second. It lay in a slump when he wanted it to move, and it got all stiff and throbbing when he wanted it to be still. Right now it was

like it wasn't even attached to him at all -- like all this touching was happening somewhere far away, and maybe Cecil was watching it on TV.

"Now we can move on to the next part of the experiment," added Carlos from somewhere-far-away. His hand was moving differently now...up at Cecil's waist...unfastening the button. "You're being so good for me. Keep being good, okay?"

He was undoing the string that kept his own pants tied closed. He was...he was taking out....

So that was an adult's...? It was so *big*....

Carlos cupped the back of Cecil's neck and held him in place for a kiss, while his other hand curled around Cecil's shaking fingers and both of their erections and held them together...and Cecil checked out completely.

If his body liked this, fine. His body could stay right there, letting Carlos touch it all over, shaking and moaning and responding as much as it wanted. Cecil would come back when they were done.

His awareness of the world came back in fits and starts. Carlos and a warm washcloth, cleaning something white and sticky off of his chest. Carlos helping him into a T-shirt that came down to his knees. Carlos reading to him from a takeout menu.

Cecil pulled himself together enough to look at the menu himself, and picked the most expensive thing he could find.

"Pricey tastes tonight, huh?" chuckled Carlos. He didn't sound mad about it. In fact, he sounded happier than Cecil had ever heard him. "Well, all right. But only because it's a special occasion! Don't expect me to spoil you like this all the time."

He petted Cecil's hair for a bit before practically skipping over to the phone.

Cecil felt awful. Here Carlos was taking care of him, doing nice things for him, and he was being...petty? Demanding? For *no good reason*.

He resolved not to eat too much of it, to leave Carlos as many leftovers as possible. Then he thought that might look unappreciative, and resolved to eat all of it. Then the food actually got there, and it turned out he didn't have much appetite anyway.

Carlos didn't have any trouble eating. (And was it just the crunchy taco shells, or had he always chewed that loudly?) But he wasn't too busy being cheerful to notice that Cecil was just picking at his food. "Not hungry? We can put that in the fridge for later, if you want."

"Uh-huh." Cecil swallowed. "I don't feel good."

Carlos reached across the dining room table and rested his hand against Cecil's forehead. "Well, you're not running a fever. Do you want to lie down anyway?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. Give me a minute to clean up."

He whisked away the food in a flash, then led Cecil into his bedroom, which had a soft plush rug under their feet and framed photos of Jupiter and Saturn on the walls. The bed was the biggest Cecil had ever seen in person. Carlos stood over him and tucked him in.

"I'll put some music on," he said, petting Cecil's hair some more. "Have you ever heard Holst's *The Planets*?"

"Dunno," admitted Cecil.

"All right. Then we'll do another experiment, find out if you like them."

The music was an instrumental symphony, in seven parts, each based on a planet. Carlos skipped Mars -- apparently it got pretty loud and mean -- also, it came first? These were *so* out of order -- and lay down next to Cecil while the clock radio next to them started playing Venus.

"Now, I know you know all your planets," he said, catching Cecil lightly under the chin. He was still all extra-smiley, his hair tousled and beautiful. "Do you know your mythological figures, too?"

"Sorta," said Cecil. The warm bed was really comfortable, and he felt better and safer with the sheets wrapped around him. "Venus is the goddess of love."

"That's right." Carlos ran his thumb over Cecil's bottom lip. "Love and sex."

Cecil blushed. "Carlos? Did we--?" Talking in this position moved his mouth like he was sucking on the tip of Carlos's thumb. He twisted his head to the side, blushing harder. "Did we have--?"

"Sex?" filled in Carlos. "No, sweetheart, that was just...touching."

"Oh."

"But it still has to be our little secret, understand?" added Carlos. "Because it isn't the kind of touching you do with just anyone. Only with someone important to you. Someone special."

A wave of strange and confusing feelings washed through Cecil's body. No matter what else he felt about the not-sex touching, he didn't want Carlos to stop saying things like that, not ever.

Blinking hard, he stammered: "Carlos, are we boyfriends?"

Carlos petted back Cecil's hair, then ran his hand down Cecil's side to rest it on the bend of Cecil's waist. "Think about it scientifically, Cecil. When boyfriends do things like see movies or have dinner together, they split the bill, right? Or they take turns buying. Then they trade off having sleepovers at each other's places. Boyfriends have to be equal."

"Oh," said Cecil again. There was so much he didn't know.

"It's okay! Don't be upset," said Carlos, with a grin that showed all his perfect teeth. "I like you just the way you are, I promise. I wouldn't want you any other way."

(Interlude: Carlos 2)

Chapter Summary

> Specific warnings for this chapter: abuser POV. Including fantasies of underage non-con, more manipulation, and no remorse.

Carlos sat with Cecil for about as long as he could take it, then, around the start of Saturn, skipped out to take a shower. And to have a furious wank, because he didn't want to push his luck by covering Cecil in semen twice in one night -- the boy looked so utterly fucked-out after the first time, Carlos had to be careful, not push things faster than Cecil could adjust -- but fucking Christ did the thought turn him on.

And Cecil was *twins*. Jesus. Carlos pictured that trusting little face in stereo, one on either side of his cock, and came all over the wall.

He had no idea if he'd ever meet the brother, much less get Kevin wrapped around his little finger the way Cecil was, but Carlos was happy to live with the fantasy. One real-life Cecil bouncing in his lap was already more than a guy could ask for. No sense in getting greedy and putting that at risk.

Although maybe he could find some hot twin videos, just to put the notion in Cecil's head.

What other ideas could Carlos ease Cecil into through the magic of porn? Stuff with actual kids was out -- he wasn't stupid, he knew downloading that stuff was just begging some guy from To Catch A Predator to show up at your door. But there were plenty of videos out there that paired skinny little guys with men big enough to pick them up, and from there he could start working on narrowing it down to different positions, acts, scenarios.

He'd have to keep track of what was in which video. How many blowjobs would Cecil have to see before he assumed it was something Carlos had a right to expect? What about crossdressers? He'd have to plot this all out.

Vulnerable little boys and spreadsheets. God, that was like all of Carlos's favorite things rolled into one.

When he got out of the shower, Cecil was no longer in his bed. Carlos made himself not panic until he'd looked around the rest of the flat, and sure enough, he found Cecil in the kitchen: quietly warming up a burrito. Precious, self-sufficient little kid. Still wearing Carlos's T-shirt, too.

"Guess you're feeling better," said Carlos from the entryway, tucking his bathrobe closed.

"Uh-huh," said Cecil with a shy smile.

"Well, I'm glad you're hungry, and I sure don't want to interrupt." Carlos smiled, warm and happy, thinking about Cecil's delicate little hands. "But my hair needs to be conditioned and detangled while it's still wet, so if that's something you might want to help with...."

Cecil actually bounced in place. "It is! It is, I do, *can* I?"

"You sure can." Carlos sauntered over to him, cupped Cecil's cheek, and drew him into a quick kiss -- which Cecil accepted readily, head tilting and mouth opening for Carlos's tongue. For all that Carlos was on the far side of forty and had already wrung two orgasms out of his cock today, that sweet compliance was still enough to make it twitch.

Cecil was just so...pure. So innocent.

One of these days Carlos was going to lose it and fucking *wreck* this kid.

School Picnic

If Kevin had a favorite thing in the whole world...okay, it would have to be baby raccoons. But if he got a top-ten list of favorite things, school picnics would definitely be on there.

They had snacks! (Carefully labeled, so he and Cecil could avoid the stuff with citrus in it, and some of the other kids could avoid things like wheat and wheat by-products.) They had races! They had games! Kevin wasted no time in getting Cecil on his volleyball team.

Teachers usually put Kevin and Cecil on different teams for things. Somebody had decided it was important for them to be distinguished as individuals, or something. Well, Kevin didn't *want* to be an individual. He wanted to be part of a *team*, and he wanted his favorite brother to be a team player with him.

Plus, Cecil was fast. And coordinated. And had great aim. People didn't expect him to be good at sports because he was such a nerd, but Kevin knew Cecil better than anyone.

Their team won! Twenty-five to *seven*. And it would've been even closer if Cecil hadn't sent that last volley right over Leann's head (after Kevin passed it to him, obviously), scoring the winning point.

Leann was still yelling about how points were a fake idea anyway, because she was *not* a team player, while Kevin's team cheered and clapped and Kevin jumped on Cecil to give him a big hug. "We did it! You did it, we won!"

"Uh-huh. Let me go!" complained Cecil, making gagging noises and trying to wriggle out of the embrace.

Kevin gave him one last squeeze anyway, because they were *great*.

After he let go, though, he realized something was wrong.

Cecil was still making the gagging noises.

"Cecil?" asked Kevin. Cecil was wide-eyed, clawing at his throat. "How come you're doing that? What's wrong?"

Cecil shook his head, like it was nothing, but obviously it was *something*.

"I'm gonna go get a teacher," said Maureen, and ran off. "Miz Mallard! Cecil's sick!"

By the time she got back, Cecil was sitting in the grass. He'd stopped choking on nothing, but his face was still all red and he looked real scared. "C'mon, Cecil, cheer up!" said Kevin, sitting with him and smiling big to show him how.

"Wow, kiddo, you don't look so good," said Ms. Mallard. "What on earth did you do to your brother, Kev?"

"I didn't do anything!" said Kevin, forgetting for a second to look happy and well-adjusted and definitely not like someone you needed to worry about or check up on. "I just hugged him and then he was choking!"

"I'm okay now," added Cecil. He didn't look okay. He mostly looked queasy.

"I think we better get you a shot, just in case," said the teacher. "Where are your EpiPens? Do you know, Kev?"

"It's not an allergy attack!" If it was, Kevin would already have *gotten* his EpiPen. Did Ms. Mallard think they didn't know what their own attacks looked like? She hadn't even been at this school for a year, and they'd had the allergies *forever*. "And don't call me Kev!"

Other grown-ups were starting to pay attention now. One of the parents, Mr. Cardinal, Vanessa's dad, came over with a water bottle. "Hey there. Cecil, right? You choke on something? Let's get some of this in you, you'll feel better."

Cecil shook his head, but Mr. Cardinal was already kneeling next to him, holding the water bottle up to his mouth.

When it touched Cecil's lips, he gagged again and tried to twist away.

Kevin was trying to smile again, but it was really hard to keep up. "Let him go!"

"It's okay. I know it's scary, but your brother's going to be fine," said Mr. Cardinal. "Cecil, you've got something stuck in your throat, so I'm going to do the Heimlich maneuver. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"He does not," said Kevin, because Cecil hadn't *swallowed* anything. Ms. Mallard and Mr. Cardinal weren't even there to see, and Kevin was! Why weren't they listening to him?

Mr. Cardinal tried to sort of pick Cecil up to do the Heimlich, which Kevin had seen people do on TV. But obviously he was doing it wrong, because the people on TV didn't bend double and throw up before you even did anything.

All he was doing was hurting Cecil worse, and Kevin wasn't going to take it any more.

They made Kevin sit in the principal's office while someone took Cecil to the nurse.

"I hope you understand how much trouble you're in, young man," said the principal. "No matter how upset you are, you can't just go around biting people."

"I know, ma'am," said Kevin, smiling to show he wasn't a threat. He read about that in a book once. It was how the girl in the book made friends with a pack of wolves, and principals were

kind of like wolves sometimes. "I'm very sorry."

"We're trying to get in touch with your mother, but nobody's answered your home phone. Do you know if she has a cell phone number? Or if she's out somewhere we can call?"

Kevin shrugged. "Dunno."

"Your brother got sick today, Kevin. Your mother should know. As soon as possible."

Well, it wasn't *Kevin's* fault Mom didn't answer phones. "She's probably at her thing, I guess."

"What thing is that?"

"Sometimes Mom has a thing. She's usually home by dinner." They were probably asking Cecil the same question, and he was a better storyteller than Kevin, so Kevin just had to be vague enough that he didn't contradict anything Cecil said. "Or else it's in the fridge. I dunno. Can I go wait with Cecil? Please?"

The smiling must have worked, because the principal finally took him to the school clinic and told the nurse to keep a close eye on him. The nurse agreed and sent Kevin into the back room, where Cecil was lying on a cheap bed with a stiff cushion and a big froufy pillow. She could see from her desk up front if they tried to sneak out, but she wasn't really keeping an eye on them at all.

Good. Kevin pulled up a wheelie chair next to the bed. "You feel better now, right?"

"Uh-huh," said Cecil. He was breathing normal again, and wasn't all red, just quiet. "You need to smile less."

"I smile to show things are *okay*," said Kevin. "You should try it more."

"I'm serious!" Cecil sat up and hugged his knees, glaring at Kevin. "Normal people feel bad sometimes. And normal people show it. The clinic staff were out there talking, when they thought I wasn't listening -- one of them thought you needed *evaluation*. Because your 'emotional responses are not appropriate'."

Kevin's face fell. He hadn't realized until now, but his cheeks hurt from all the grinning he'd been doing today. "They said that?"

"Uh-huh. So knock it off! Unless you *want* to get Mom in trouble?"

Now that was just mean. "No! Obviously not," hissed Kevin. "If I *wanted* to get Mom in trouble, I'd just tell someone that you keep going somewhere for sleepovers and she doesn't even notice."

Cecil froze up, glaring even harder.

"Where do you go, anyway? Is it fun? How come I'm not invited?"

"You're not invited because it's *personal*," said Cecil icily. His cheeks were flushed. Kevin hoped that didn't mean he was going to start gagging again. "I go visit someone who is *my* friend, not yours, and what we do is none of your business."

Kevin narrowed his eyes. "Are you friends with some kind of secret agent?"

"No!" said Cecil...then relaxed and kinda grinned. "Although it would be *so cool* if he was."

They kept Cecil in for observation for the rest of the day, but when it was time to go home the nurse said he was okay to go. In between Vanessa's dad came in to check on them, and Kevin tried Cecil's strategy of a non-happy emotional response. "I'm really, really sorry, Mr. Cardinal," he said, lip wobbling. "I didn't want to hurt you, honest! I was just worried about Cecil."

It worked! Mr. Cardinal said it was okay, he wasn't hurt bad, and he would even ask the principal to go easy on them, because he totally understood why Kevin had been scared and upset.

They got away with a letter to deliver to Mom. All they had to do was bring it back with her signature, to prove she had read it. Easy peasy. Kevin could do Mom's signature in his sleep.

Cecil got the bus that went to the observatory, like he always did in the afternoons. Kevin got the bus home, but didn't go inside. Instead he went to the dog park across the street, where he could do his homework and play with friendly dogs and enjoy the sunshine for as long as it was out.

Birthday

The morning of his birthday, Cecil had strange, burning-hot dreams where everything smelled like lavender, and woke up sweaty and sticky.

He knew what it was. His body had done the thing it did sometimes with Carlos, the one Carlos said meant he liked the way he was being touched. But this was Cecil's own room, and Carlos wasn't here, so this time Carlos hadn't done anything to make it happen. Cecil had done it all on his own.

He got dressed real quiet, so he wouldn't wake up Mom or Kevin, then pulled the sheets off the bed and put them and his underwear in the hamper. At least nobody in the building would think it was weird if they saw him in the laundry room early in the morning. He used to be there all the time, because when they were little Kevin used to get nosebleeds overnight, and would wake up with blood *everywhere*. Kevin always said they didn't have to do laundry right away, it was "more cost effective" to wait a couple days and then clean up two rounds of blood at once. Cecil always said Kevin was *gross*, and made him let Cecil take the sheets.

Nobody was in the laundry room anyway. Cecil shoved everything in the machine, threw a thing of detergent after it, and switched it on. There. Now nobody had to know.

Not even Carlos.

The scientists down at the observatory got him cake!

It was ice cream cake, and it said *Happy Birthday Cecil* in purple icing, and it had eleven candles and everything. The scientists sang, and clapped, and everyone wanted to pat him on the back or ruffle his hair. Steve Carlsberg whispered that Carlos had told the rest of them when his birthday was, like that wasn't *obvious*, Carlos was the only one *Cecil* had told -- and with all the extra touching going on, Cecil decided to take a chance and hug Carlos in public. Carlos was all awkward at first, but he sort of rested a hand on the top of Cecil's head and ran another down the curve of his spine, which was a good level of hugging-back, Cecil thought.

They got him a present, too. A keychain from the observatory gift shop: one of the theoretical exoplanets, Cecil's favorite.

He had to stay in the break room until he finished his slice of cake, then Susan Wilman put the rest of it in the freezer and Cecil went to Carlos's office. Carlos was on the phone, but he motioned that it was okay for Cecil to sit and wait while he finished the call. "Yeah? Okay, got it, great. Thanks, Doug. No, really, I can't thank you enough. You're a lifesaver. Uh-huh. Talk to you soon."

"Was that for work?" asked Cecil, trying to sound cool about it.

"Sure was. Doug works with the AMiBA, the big radio telescope down in Hawaii." Carlos patted his lap, inviting Cecil over. "Want to see some charts of the cosmic background radiation they've observed?"

"Uh-huh!" Cecil took the seat, relaxing, and let Carlos put an arm around him. He didn't have to worry about Carlos being all nice and friendly with this Doug guy. It was just business, and besides, Hawaii was thousands of miles away.

Carlos brought up the charts, put his hand on Cecil's knee, and explained what the color-coding meant and how the scientists had to correct for distortions so they could find distant galaxies. Then he kissed Cecil's cheek and said, "Hey, birthday boy, I've been thinking."

"Oh?"

"It's part of being a scientist, remember? And here's what I was thinking: do you still want to see a movie together?"

Cecil caught his breath. "*Can* we? Can we really? It won't get you in trouble?"

"Only if someone who knows us sees us. And that's less likely to happen if we go to a theater in the next town over. We can get a hotel room for the night, make a trip out of it. Does that sound good to you?"

Cecil wasn't sure. The movie -- in a theater! -- sounded great. Spending the night with Carlos was more confusing. He liked the parts with music and good food and cuddling -- and there was a *lot* of cuddling. The other parts blurred in his memory, the sights flickering, the sounds patched over with static. He didn't know how to feel about Carlos touching him until he was hot all over and couldn't breathe right, or about his mouth being full with something hot and salty weighing against his tongue, or about slippery, sticky liquid drying on his face or chest or legs until a gentle hand sponged it off.

The trip was supposed to be a birthday present. It was Kevin's birthday too. Maybe Cecil should say it was only fair if they both went. Maybe Carlos would be different with Kevin around.

Or maybe Carlos would say Kevin was just as cute as Cecil, and try to kiss him too. And maybe Kevin's body wouldn't like it, the way Cecil's did. Maybe Kevin would be upset. Maybe....

"Hey, it's okay, sweetheart," said Carlos, stroking his leg. "It's just an idea. What are you looking so worried for?"

Cecil cuddled against Carlos's chest, resting his head on Carlos's shoulder. "Can the hotel have a pool? And a hot tub?" It would be fine if the trip had more good parts. That would make up for the confusing parts.

"You want a pool? Sure, we can get a hotel with a pool."

"And can we do other things, not just the movie? Can we go bowling? Or go to an arcade?"

"Tell you what. If I can find places to do those things, we can do both." Carlos kissed his forehead. "We'll make the whole trip about doing things you like."

Cecil didn't know why he was being taken to the nurse's office. He wasn't sick. He asked about Kevin, and got told Kevin wasn't sick either. Was something wrong with Mom?

He got dropped off in the room next to the nurse, which was the guidance counselor. Kevin was there already: not doing his creepy smiley thing, but looking like he sure wanted to. And there was a man Cecil didn't recognize. The normal guidance counselor was a woman, so this was someone different.

"You must be Cecil," said the non-counselor. He introduced himself, too, although Cecil was a lot more interested in finding out what was going on than in some random guy's name. "I'm here to talk to you, get to know you a little bit, make sure everyone at school is treating you right. Your brother was just telling me about some of the things he has fun with."

"Volleyball," put in Kevin. "And dogs! Dogs are great."

"They sure are," agreed the stranger. "How about you, Cecil? What are you interested in? It can be a school subject, or something you do outside of school. Anything goes."

Cecil sat in the chair next to Kevin. There wasn't a desk in front of them; all the chairs were in a little circle around a table. "I like astronomy. Stars and planets and mystery objects and stuff." Thinking about the AMiBA, and some of the other observations Carlos did, he added, "And radio. I like radio."

The stranger prompted him with some questions, and they weren't about Mom or his home life or anything suspicious, just about space and the Mars rovers and how radio telescopes worked. Cecil ended up getting really into it, explaining stuff he'd learned from Carlos. There were questions for Kevin too, and he talked about some of the dogs in the dog park near home, and how you had to teach them differently based on temperament, but if you paid good attention to their mood you could train your pet to do basically anything.

It went on like that for more than half an hour. Cecil didn't think the guy could've found out anything by the time he said, "Okay, our time is just about up. Let me write you two a couple of hall passes to get back to class. I'm already looking forward to talking to you next week."

He took his briefcase and left the office at the same time they did. Kevin and Cecil didn't think about where their classes were right now, just made sure to walk in the other direction.

"That sure was weird!" said Kevin under his breath. "How come he's coming back?"

"Dunno," said Cecil. "Bet you said something that freaked him out."

"Me? I talked about *dogs* and *meadows* and *happy things*. You're the weirdo talking about *dark planets lit by no sun*."

"Hey! That is a normal scientific concept! Carlos said so!"

"Who's Carlos?"

Cecil broke out in a furious blush. "Someone who knows a *lot* about *science*," he snapped. "Way more than you. Probably a *million* times more than what's-his-face with his expensive briefcase and his fancy tan jacket."

Hotel

Carlos had promised Cecil a hotel with a pool, and Carlos did not let him down.

The only bathing suit Cecil had was a couple of years old, so the shorts were shorter and tighter than they used to be, but he let the drawstring out as far as it would go and they still fit. And anyway, Carlos wouldn't judge. Carlos might even buy him a new suit, if he was cute enough to earn it.

He wanted to go swimming right after they checked in. Carlos tempted him with other offers, but they could always go see the movie or go bowling afterward, right?

His only regret was that Carlos had to wear a swim cap to protect his beautiful hair. So Cecil wouldn't be able to see it at all. Still, you have to make sacrifices sometimes.

There were other people at the pool when they went out, including some grown-ups in sunglasses reading on the beach chairs, whilst some kids played keep-it-up in the shallow end with a beach ball. The kids let Cecil join in! He was pretty good, even though he couldn't be as fast as he was in volleyball, since they were in the water. It was a *ton* of fun.

And then the lady who was probably their mom came over to the edge of the water, not looking happy.

"Where are your parents, young man? Children aren't allowed out here unsupervised."

"I'm not unsupervised," said Cecil, trying not to look scared or suspicious. He pointed to Carlos, who hadn't done a lot of swimming, and was on one of the chairs now. "I have supervision, see?"

The lady made a face like she'd just smelled something bad. "That is definitely not your father. I'd better take you to the front desk -- they can sort you out."

Before Cecil could shrink away, she grabbed his wrist.

"No!" yelled Cecil. "Carlos! Help!"

Carlos got up right away. "What's going on?" he demanded, striding over on long legs that ate up the distance between them. Maybe Cecil wasn't big enough yet to fight the woman off, but Carlos was tall enough to scare her, easy. "Let the kid go!"

As soon as he was let go, Cecil scrambled up over the edge of the pool and hid behind Carlos. The woman just straightened up and met his eyes, still unhappy. "Are you really watching this child? Where are his parents?"

"Well, of all the racist...yes, I'm watching him!" snapped Carlos. "His mother is *sick*, his father is not in the picture, and I am *trying* to give him a nice day out and get his mind off things, and here you had to go and upset him. You should be ashamed of yourself." Putting an

arm around Cecil, he added, "Come on, sweetheart, let's get you inside. We'll find something else to do today."

Carlos stood in the shower with Cecil, scrubbing his back and washing the chlorine-scented tangle his hair had turned into. "I'm sorry that woman scared you. What kind of person would try to take you away from me?"

"A real jerk," said Cecil, still shaky. From the almost-fight, not from the shower. He'd been naked around Carlos enough, he could blank out the shyness and uncertainty it used to make him feel. "Can we go bowling after this?"

"I don't know. That depends on you."

"I want to!" exclaimed Cecil. "You said we could...you said...." His mind whirled, trying to figure out what he had to do...he leaned back toward Carlos's chest a little, and bumped his elbow against Carlos's half-hard erection. "Do you mean I have to...t-take care of this first?"

"You are so fucking sweet," sighed Carlos, working his way down Cecil's back with the soap. "It's your birthday, so I'll let you get away with it this time. What I was going to say was, we can go if you can convince me you won't yell my name in public again."

Cecil gulped. Oh, no, he'd done that. And they'd talked about not doing it, too. If only he'd listened to Mom's safety rules about not giving out names in public! Mom's rules were important, even if it wasn't really because World Government agents in helicopters were watching everything you did. "I'm sorry! I got scared."

"And what if you get scared again, huh? We came all the way to the next town over so people wouldn't recognize me, and here you go, putting us in danger."

"I'm sorry," repeated Cecil. He felt miserable. All his fault.

"So we might have to stay here for a little while." Carlos got down on his knees, letting the hot shower patter against the back of Cecil's head. He soaped up Cecil's stomach with slick and sudsy hands while he kissed Cecil's drippy back. "Don't worry, I'll make sure we still have fun."

He moved one hand between Cecil's legs, all gentle and slow. Cecil stood real still while the edges of his vision blurred into static.

"You get it up so fast sometimes. It's like your body was made for this."

"It...is?" asked Cecil, weak in the knees.

"Mmm. Are you gentle like this when you touch yourself?"

"I -- I don't." It didn't count if it happened when you were asleep...right? Or did it?

Carlos chuckled, like he knew exactly what Cecil was thinking. "Sure you don't. Scoot forward and hang on to the bar, okay, birthday boy?"

Cecil did as he was told. The bath mat under his feet and the solid metal bar in the tile wall were both stable and sturdy, even when his legs wobbled and his heart skipped out of rhythm. Carlos's hands supported his hips until he had his feet planted again, then they were *all over* him, rubbing and stroking while Carlos murmured how he'd be okay, how he was doing such a good job.

"I'm going to do an experiment," said Carlos. "You just try to relax, all right? Easy, now."

Cecil tried to be good, but he squirmed when he felt -- "Carlos! Don't -- that's *dirty!*"

"Nothing is dirty if you use enough soap and water," murmured Carlos. "And there's plenty of that around here. It'll be okay. I told you, sweetheart, it's just an experiment. Relax. For science."

Whatever the rest of the experiment was, Cecil blanked it out.

Orgasm usually unraveled Cecil into a limp, glassy-eyed zombie, if he wasn't one already when it hit. Carlos basically had to carry him to bed. It was that or leave him in the tub, and what if the kid caught a chill and came down with something? Docile was good; disabled was not.

He ended up wrapping Cecil in all the towels he could find, tucking a blanket over him, then pulling on a bathrobe and luxuriating in the afterglow.

Carlos would never get tired of the satisfaction of solving a scientific mystery. Even if the solution was something like "this star has no planetary transits that your instruments can detect" or "you can only get two fingers in this boy, fucking his cute little ass is right out." Besides, that was only the case for now, not forever. Past performance was not a guarantee of future results.

When Cecil came out of his little haze, Carlos managed to convince him that maybe he *was* coming down with something, and for safety's sake they shouldn't go bowling. (Fucking bowling. Of all the hobbies Cecil could've been into...well, no vulnerable, isolated, affection-hungry little target is perfect.)

They had dinner and a movie. A space-travel movie, so Carlos had a lot of withering opinions on which parts were science, and which were pure fiction. Cecil hung on to the wide sweeping interstellar vistas and Carlos's complaints with equal wide-eyed ardor.

The last thing Cecil did before bed was kiss Carlos good night. On his own initiative. With tongue.

Never in a galactic year would Carlos have dreamed he'd get such a sweet boy conditioned so well. Past performance, future results, sure, but come on...there was no reason they couldn't keep this going indefinitely.

(Interlude: Steve)

No one listened when Steve Carlsberg talked. Even now, as he tried to explain his fears to Susan Wilman, her attention was drifting.

But this was important. Steve saw connections. He saw meaning. He saw things happen and he drew lines between them, even if maybe they were lines nobody else wanted to draw.

He'd been watching Cecil in the observatory for almost two years now, and over the past six months Steve saw Cecil go from a bright, energetic, opinionated child to an anxious, moody, defensive one. Kids changed as they grew up, sure, but Cecil was almost eleven, the same age as Steve's own daughter, and she'd never changed so much so fast.

That was about the same amount of time Carlos Menendez had started letting Cecil hang around him. Steve saw Cecil latch on to Menendez's side whenever possible. He saw them at lunch in the cafeteria, sometimes. He saw a lot of Menendez's office door, closed, with them behind it.

Steve saw Cecil walking around with fancy gifts like the kid had never had before. That crazy stuffed wolf. A T-shirt from the museum shop. A nice wristwatch. Cecil got past his general crossness at Steve enough to brag about Carlos (*smart, skilled Carlos!*) fixing the watch, so it was the only working timepiece in his whole apartment. It wasn't until later that Steve thought he should've asked: was Cecil just repeating what he heard, or did he know what the man's apartment looked like?

"At least Menendez is giving him more age-appropriate things now, instead of child's toys," said Dr. Wilman, when Steve finally got her to listen for more than a sentence. "Honestly, Carlsberg, I won't hear another word against him! This is a respectable research observatory -- don't poison it with such awful insinuations."

Maybe Steve should have stopped paying attention to the things he saw. It wasn't like carrying these suspicions around was making his life easier. Quite the opposite.

But if there was someone who was afraid someone else might decide to act inappropriately toward Janice -- well, Steve wouldn't want them to let it go. Even if his co-workers wouldn't listen -- even if they held it against him. Protecting a child was more important than all that.

So Steve began making notes. Emailing them to himself, to make sure they had timestamps. Compiling records of the time alone together, of the gifts and the meals, of any little thing he had a bad feeling about and wanted to document.

When a person finally came along who wanted to hear Menendez's history of suspicious behavior, Steve Carlsberg would be ready to share.

Sharks, Part A

Chapter Summary

> Thank you to everyone who has waited patiently for this update. The rest of them will be quicker because the end of the story is finally all planned out.
>
> Be brave, Cecil! Rescue is only a few chapters away.

"If you love someone, they'll never make you sad," declared Kevin, scribbling more red colored-pencil hearts around the edges of his drawing. "And if they do, you're probably not trying hard enough to be happy."

He didn't know anything about drawing, Cecil thought. When you saw this out of the corner of your eye, it looked like the paper was covered in blood splatter. It was going to make their counselor guy, the one in the tan jacket, think Kevin had something wrong with him. *Subliminally* wrong.

Okay, Cecil's drawing was covered in red that was *supposed* to be blood splatter, but that was different. Cecil was drawing Jaws fanart. It was *justified*.

"That's not even true," he told his brother, reaching for another blue pencil. "You can love someone and still have them hurt you, or make you sad, all the time. If they're special, you need to put in special effort to work through it."

"That's a good point, Cecil," said the man in the tan jacket. "Nobody's perfect. Anyone you love is going to mess up sometimes. In fact, sometimes a person can do really bad things, and you might love them anyway."

Cecil stuck his tongue out at Kevin. Hah.

"But Kevin's partly right too," continued the man, making Kevin sit up and stop coloring. "If someone's making you sad, you can do things to protect your own happiness. It doesn't mean you don't love them."

"Like what?" asked Cecil. Probably too fast. He put his head down and focused real hard on shading in Jaws's fins, so he wouldn't seem too interested in the answer.

"Let me give you an example. Let me tell you about my dad. I love my dad very much! But he has this problem...he's very, very racist."

"Like how racist?" asked Kevin.

The man looked in both directions, though his office was closed and there weren't any secret listening devices hidden in the plants (no matter what Mom would have said), then bent low across the table and said in a hushed voice, "When he does ads for his business, he dresses up in a Halloween costume of a Native American and calls himself 'the Apache Tracker'."

"*No*," gasped Kevin.

"I've seen those ads on the bus!" added Cecil. "The super white guy, right? In the plastic feather headdress? That guy is *such* an as--"

Before he could finish insulting the counselor's father right to his face, Kevin cut him off with a friendly hug around the throat.

"Careful with your brother, Kevin," said the man. (He'd pulled them apart one time, when Kevin was so enthusiastic it was starting to hurt. This time Kevin let go first.) "It's okay. People have a right to be mad at my dad. And to call him a...let's say, a jerk. I've told him it's racist, and he needs to stop, but he thinks I'm being too sensitive. All of that makes me unhappy! And sure, I could put in a...special effort...to work through it. To push past those difficulties. But I don't."

Cecil couldn't even pretend he wasn't interested any more. "So what do you *do?*"

"I set boundaries. I tell him, he isn't allowed to wear that tacky clothing or say any of those racist things around me. And one of the ways he shows me he loves *me* is by respecting those boundaries. That's one thing you can do when someone's making you sad."

"Can you set boundaries for anything?" asked Kevin. "It makes me sad when I do bad on a math test. Can I make it a boundary that teachers aren't allowed to give me tests?"

"Sometimes authority figures are allowed to make you do things. Especially when you're a kid," admitted the man. "But there are some boundaries you have with everyone, even teachers and parents, right?" He looked at Cecil's drawing. "For instance, your math teacher isn't allowed to feed you to a shark."

Kevin giggled. So did Cecil, even though sharks were *very serious*.

Cecil was still thinking about sharks, and everything they'd talked about afterward, at the observatory a few days later.

Once he was in Carlos's office, and once Carlos had the door shut and locked, Cecil burst out, "Can you not touch my legs?"

"What?"

"And can I not sit in your lap for a while?" added Cecil. "I want to sit on my own."

"Honey, what's wrong?" Carlos put down his keys and touched Cecil's face, fingertips skimming over Cecil's cheek. "Did something happen? Do you not like me anymore?"

"I do, I do!" Wow, Cecil was really glad he'd gotten to talk this out earlier, so he wasn't confused. "I just want -- I -- I'm working on a really hard unit in math right now, so I need to think about it, so I need space."

There, now he wasn't even saying Carlos had done anything *bad*, like wearing a racist headdress or making fun of a student for getting a question wrong or telling that one girl in Cecil's class with the bone disease that she had to play dodgeball. He was just saying he needed space for personal reasons. Like how Carlos needed to go on science trips sometimes, and needed distance from Cecil, and that was okay.

For some reason his chest felt tight whilst he waited for Carlos's answer. Almost like he was scared of how Carlos would react. Then Carlos shrugged and ruffled his hair. "Sure, Ceece. Can't say no to a cute voice. And yours is the cutest voice of all."

So Cecil sat on his own chair, doing the homework from chapter 37 while Carlos analyzed data from the ESA's Planck observatory and feeling super relieved. It was that easy. Of course Carlos would respect his boundaries! All he had to do was ask.

Also, Carlos's new nickname for him was the *best*.

"...and we're re-checking the figures, but as it stands, there are variations in the cosmic background radiation that don't match the ones predicted by the standard model of physics...."

Cecil gazed at the patterns on the screen, rapt, as Carlos pointed out anomalies with one hand and rested the other on Cecil's back. They were in separate chairs again today, nobody in Carlos's lap. In *Cecil's* lap was the fancy omelet Carlos had bought him at the cafeteria, after he admitted he hadn't had lunch.

It was all his favorite kinds of attention from Carlos, put together.

So of course *Steve Carlsberg* had to knock on the door and interrupt. "Dr. Menendez? Is Cecil in there with you? His brother's looking for him."

Cecil looked up at Carlos in horror. What was Kevin doing here? This was *Cecil's* place. These were Cecil's scientists. (Well, except Steve. Kevin could keep Steve, if he wanted.)

Carlos ruffled his hair in a reassuring kind of way, then went to get the door.

Turned out Kevin had left his keys at home. Cecil wondered why Mom wasn't letting him in, but knew better than to ask how she was doing in front of other people. He dug through his backpack as fast as he could, while Carlos shook Kevin's hand -- at least he wasn't ruffling Kevin's hair! -- and said, "I'm Carlos. It's so nice to finally meet you."

Should Cecil take off the plastic planet keychain? It had been a gift. He didn't want Kevin messing it up, the way he'd messed up Cecil's spiderwolf. But he also wanted Carlos to stop touching Kevin -- it made him all hot under the skin -- as fast as possible. And this would take time, because his hands were shaking.

"Cecil says you're really smart," said Kevin politely.

That did it. Cecil marched over and shoved his keys into his brother's hands, keychain and all. "He's very smart. He has a lot of smart things he has to work on. Go home! And you better let me in when I get back."

He still felt shaky and flushed even when they were safely alone in a locked room again.

"Aw, my sweet Cecil, are you jealous?" When Cecil didn't answer, Carlos hugged him, letting Cecil's burning face rest against his chest. "Don't worry. Kevin's adorable, of course, but there's only one person I truly care about, and it's not him."

"Is it...me?" asked Cecil.

Carlos chuckled. "Who else? You're still coming to visit my place this Friday, aren't you?"

Wow. Cecil knew Carlos cared about him -- but to be the *only* person? If Carlos didn't even have a sick mother or a pain-in-the-neck brother to care about...if anything ever happened to Cecil, Carlos would have *no one*. He'd never realized he was so important. "Uh-huh."

"Then I'll show you extra caring in person once I've got you there." Carlos bent over to kiss Cecil's forehead, then his mouth. "I can't wait. Cannot."

Sharks, Part B

Chapter Summary

Extra warning for mental instability and parental abuse in this chapter.

"Can you set boundaries for anything?" asked Kevin. If that was a real rule, it sounded pretty useful. "It makes me sad when I do bad on a math test. Can I make it a boundary that teachers aren't allowed to give me tests?"

"Sometimes authority figures are allowed to make you do things. Especially when you're a kid," said the man in the tan jacket. "But there are some boundaries you have with everyone, even teachers and parents, right?"

He looked at Cecil's drawing. It was fanart for *Jaws*, which was gross, Kevin thought. Any minute now it was going to make their counselor guy think Cecil had something wrong with him. The whole movie was about terrible things happening to nice people, and why would a well-adjusted person like stories about terrible things?

But the man didn't talk about Cecil being gross or wrong. All he said was, "For instance, your math teacher isn't allowed to feed you to a shark."

Kevin giggled. So did Cecil.

Cecil didn't ask any questions, so Kevin got to quiz the man for the whole rest of their meeting. Sometimes the man turned the question back around on him and made him think about it. Other times there were answers. Like, it turned out everyone got boundaries around their bodies. Even if someone in school got bit by a feral dog, and needed a blood transfusion, and they had the same blood type as Kevin, nobody was allowed to take Kevin's blood unless he let them. It was a law and everything! Wasn't that weird?

Before they went back to class, the man gave them each a little paper card. "If anyone ever hurts you, and you can't make them stop on your own, one thing you can do is call me. Any time, day or night."

"*Any* time?" repeated Cecil. "You do other stuff in your life, right? Don't *you* have boundaries?"

"What a good question! Yes, I do. But if you happen to call when I'm busy, I'll connect you with someone else who can help you. It's all part of my job."

"KING CITY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES," added the card.

Kevin was thinking about sharks again on the day he took the bus to the Isenberg Observatory. He was wondering if *Jaws* would be less scary if the shark had politely asked for some food, and the people had agreed. Kevin could imagine feeding part of his body to a nice shark. Would he really miss half a leg?

He'd only been to the observatory once before, on a school trip. He didn't think it was interesting enough to go back and look again. But today he'd lost his keys, and Mom either wasn't home or had put the apartment on lockdown because she heard something outside that scared her, like a street cleaning machine going by. And it was too rainy to hang out in the dog park like he normally would. So he had to find Cecil.

Cecil was probably in the employee-only section, with the scientists. How did you get into that? Kevin wandered around the exhibits and the cafeteria, looking behind displays and around corners, wondering where the doors were.

"Hey, Cecil. Did you lose something?"

Kevin was used to being called the wrong name sometimes. He turned to the stranger with a big smile.

"Whoa," said the strange man. "You're definitely not Cecil. Are you his brother?"

"That's right! So you know Cecil? What's your name, friend?"

"Steve. Steve Carlsberg. I work here, so I see your brother around a lot. Are you looking for him? He's probably in the offices -- I can show you, if you want."

"Yes, please!" said Kevin happily, and took Mr. Carlsberg's hand.

Mr. Carlsberg looked *really* surprised by that, but he didn't shake Kevin off, so, win-win!

"Are you related to Janice Carlsberg?" asked Kevin, as the scientist took him down a hall to a stairwell. "She's in my class. Are you her dad?"

"Yes, I am."

Kevin felt really sorry for Janice. There was something wrong with her bones, so she had to use a wheelchair and couldn't participate in most of the stuff they did in gym. She couldn't even play *volleyball*. "How come you do space science, and not medical science? Medical science could fix her, I bet. If you worked hard enough."

Mr. Carlsberg gave his hand a companionable squeeze. "Janice doesn't want to be 'fixed'. And she doesn't need to be. She's okay as long as people understand her, and can adapt to her needs."

Really? Huh.

They ended up in a nice blank workspace with bare white walls and comfortingly same-y cubicles. Mr. Carlsberg knocked on the door of a closed office. Turned out Cecil was in there, along with another scientist, a tall guy with lots of teeth.

"You must be Kevin. I'm Carlos," said the toothy scientist -- so this was Cecil's secret friend! -- whilst Cecil dug through his backpack. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

Kevin matched him smile for smile, tooth for tooth. "Cecil says you're really smart," he told Carlos, and thought to himself that he sure hoped it was true, because the poor man's looks weren't gonna do him any favors.

Cecil shoved his keys into Kevin's hands and practically pushed him out the door. "He's very smart. He has a lot of smart things he has to work on. Go home! And you better let me in when I get back."

Kevin probably could've figured out the way back on his own, but Mr. Carlsberg was real nice and walked with him anyway. "Do you boys have a lot of nights when your parents aren't home?"

"No!" said Kevin brightly. "Mom's home all the time. She's very present in our lives."

"Is she home now?"

"Yes!" Probably.

"And she can't let you in?"

Too late, Kevin realized it had been a trap. Gosh, Mr. Carlsberg was some kind of devious mastermind! He tried to keep smiling, then remembered what he'd learned about *appropriate* and *not suspicious* emotional responses, and dropped the smile for a serious-earnest face. "No, she can't. Sometimes she can't do things. So we have to understand her, and adapt to her needs! And then it all works out. Like it did now." He jingled Cecil's keyring to prove the point.

"Hm." Mr. Carlsberg followed Kevin out the front doors and down the hill toward the bus stop. "You and your brother seem like a resourceful couple of kids. Hey, can I tell you something? I'm not Janice's original father. I'm her double father."

"Is that like being a stepfather?"

"Um...double father, stepfather, father-in-law...I can never get those terms straight. Whichever one means I married her mother a few years ago. And Janice lives with her mom and me full-time. See, her father is still alive, but he's sick, and he can't take care of a kid and himself at the same time."

"Oh," said Kevin, not sure how he was supposed to feel about this.

"It's a good thing! Her dad is happy that she's safe and healthy. That's what all good parents want, for their kids to be safe. And Janice still sees him every weekend. They don't have to miss each other at all."

Kevin was mostly thinking about that, and not about sharks, on the whole bus ride home.

It got really late on Friday night and Cecil still hadn't come home. Well, if he was having a sleepover, that just meant more leftover BBQ for Kevin. And nobody was around to complain about the mess if he got barbecue sauce all over his shirt.

Mom was around, but she was busy listening to the radio. She had on a channel that sounded like all static to Kevin. He took his dinner into the TV room and started looking for a channel with something more interesting than static.

Before he could find anything, she followed him in.

"Hi, Mom," said Kevin. "Is it too loud? I can turn it down."

His mother just stared at him. "Your eyes," she hissed. "What's wrong with your eyes?"

"Nothing's wrong." Kevin picked up his plate again. When Mom got like this, all nervous and angry, it was usually better to go to your room. Even telling her to cheer up didn't help. "I'm gonna go now, okay?"

"No!" Mom grabbed his arm when he tried to sneak by. "Who sent you? What have you done with my son?"

"Mom, I *am* your son. It's me. It's *Kevin*." It wasn't fair. He was always the twin she thought was fake! How come she didn't question *Cecil's* existence sometimes, huh?

Or better yet, how come she couldn't always remember that *both* of them were real, and Kevin had been here as long as Cecil had? He wasn't some kind of secret government duplicate that had been snuck into her house! (As if the government could even orchestrate an evil project of that quality! You would need some kind of well-run private business to do that.)

She wasn't getting it now, that was for sure. "The mirror will show who you really are," she growled, dragging Kevin towards the bathroom.

"It will not!" yelled Kevin, and shoved her off.

He'd never been tall enough or strong enough to do that before.

Not that he was really tall *now*, but he wasn't really *short* any more either, and Mom? She was kinda short.

She tried to grab him with both hands, all her fingernails sharp and scratchy. Kevin dropped his dinner and wrestled her off. In the struggle she slipped on some notebook Cecil had left

lying around, and when she went sprawling Kevin had a chance to run all the way to his room and slam the door.

Then he decided to push the bookshelf in front of the door too.

There was a loose nail on the side where he did the pushing. He didn't even notice until after he was done and noticed that he'd cut the side of his hand.

Mom didn't break in. But she did bang on the door a couple times, and demand to know if "the Smiling God" had sent him. Which made more sense than him being a government project, at least. But still! Kevin held his hand against the corner of his shirt to soak up the blood, and squeezed his eyes shut until she went away, and thought, *This isn't okay. I don't like it. I want a boundary against it. This is not okay!*

It was really late when Kevin went out of his room again. He wasn't hungry, because he and Cecil both kept some chips and stuff under their beds in case Mom threw out everything in the cupboard and they couldn't afford takeout, but everyone has to go to the bathroom eventually.

He could hear snoring from in front of the TV. He walked real slow and careful, not turning on any lights. His backpack was by the door. (Cecil's backpack was probably wherever Cecil was.)

Kevin fished out the card that said KING CITY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES. In the kitchen, he opened the fridge a crack so he could read the numbers, and whispered them to himself like a little chant until he had them memorized.

Then he got the phone off its cradle and punched the light-up buttons, one by one.

The Rules Change

Chapter Notes

> The dialogue from the podcast in recent months has inspired this story in ways I never expected or wanted it to.

If the Carlos from, let's say, a year ago could have seen himself now, he would have been so disappointed.

He had a delectable, agreeable, sweet-faced eleven-year-old on his couch, wearing nothing but a pair of tiny shorts and one of Carlos's own T-shirts...and, as if that weren't enough, sucking on the tip of an ice cream bar. And he was *on the phone* instead of all up in that.

Well, the present-day Carlos had his reasons.

Cecil had gotten skittish and standoffish lately. (Where had he even picked up those lines about boundaries? Had some Disney-channel show done a Very Special Episode on healthy relationships?) So Carlos was handling the kid with a light touch for a while. Even someone as lonely and affection-starved as Cecil would probably balk at an honest "of course I'm not really going to stop touching your legs, much less patting your ass, pulling you into my lap, or fondling your cock so you squirm and writhe in that way that makes me practically come in my pants."

But Cecil was still innocent and trusting at heart, and only had so much fight in him. Carlos could pretend to go along with what he wanted for a while, build Cecil's comfort levels back up, then start reeling him in again. And it didn't hurt to spoil Cecil as much as possible in the meantime. Let the boy's own sense of guilt and obligation take him to the conclusion of *perfect Carlos is so good to me, I owe him this* without Carlos ever having to spell it out.

That was the point of the ice cream bar, no matter how badly the sight tested Carlos's resolve. Cecil loved ice cream.

The other reason Carlos was on the phone was because there was some serious science going down. He and his colleagues at the AMiBA in Hawaii had a real chance of revolutionizing the understanding of the shape of the cosmos. His dick might not appreciate how cool and monumental that was, but his brain sure did.

It was such a big deal, even the occasional awkward Cecil-induced hard-on didn't stop him from talking about the observed CMB fluctuations. (Good thing they weren't doing this on Skype.)

By the time Alesha finally said their goodbyes and hung up, Carlos was filled with the light of scientific discovery. "Hey, Cecil! Guess whose observations of the cosmic microwave background have produced new insight into the early expansion of the universe?"

An excited Cecil leaned over the back of the couch, little pink tongue darting over his lips. "Is it you?"

"It's me! Congratulate me, honey."

Cecil had a weakness for pet names even bigger than his weakness for treats. He melted into a hug when Carlos sat next to him, nuzzled Carlos's cheek all on his own, and tensed but didn't complain when he was pulled across Carlos's lap.

"Calm down, you," scolded Carlos. He kept part of his promise, resisting the urge to caress Cecil's legs, instead rubbing Cecil's back through the soft fabric of the T-shirt. "I know we talked about space and boundaries and all of that, especially with this whole chapter-37 thing you're working on…gotta have time to think. And, Ceece, I understand time to think! But I have made an important scientific discovery, and you *know* the rules are different when an important scientific discovery is made."

That should have done it. Sweet, credulous Cecil should've taken Carlos's word as the final voice of authority, and happily submitted to some celebratory kissing. Where did he get off looking doubtful? "They are...? I...I didn't know about that."

"There's a lot you don't know about," said Carlos sternly. Maybe he'd spent too much time emphasizing how smart and wonderful Cecil was. The praise was supposed to make Cecil more *attached* to Carlos, not confident enough to stand up to him. "Always getting fidgety about the most normal things, aren't you? You ol' fussbudget."

Oh, good, Cecil looked abashed. Vulnerability still close to the surface.

"It's okay. I know you can't help it. Sure, it *would* upset me...but it's just part of who you are. So much of each other would be annoying if it weren't also the essence of us."

No point making Cecil feel insecure about something he could *change*. Then he would just change it, and the notion that he was worthy of having his own opinions would pop right back up.

Carlos used his most soothing tone of voice for all this, and ran his fingers through Cecil's hair, and was thrilled with how readily Cecil lapped it up. When Carlos finished by pulling the boy in for a peck on the lips, Cecil obediently opened his mouth for Carlos's tongue.

Wonderful. They were getting back to normal.

Could he build up the same kind of emotional dependence in Cecil's delicious identical twin? Cecil had been starry-eyed from the moment he saw Carlos, and the brother wasn't, so that would make it harder...but fuck if Carlos didn't want to give it a try. The payoff would be so worth it.

He squeezed Cecil's cute little ass and wondered what Kevin was doing right now.

Kevin was hugging the man in the tan jacket, not crying but pretty close to it, while people from the hospital took his mother into an ambulance.

(He had asked, first, if hugging was okay. The man had said yes.)

"I know this is scary," said the man, in a deep, calming voice. He was pretty good at calming. Also, at hugging back. "But the doctors are here to help your mother. And I'm here to help you, and your brother too."

"Great!" squeaked Kevin, not sounding great at all. "That is so great. I am just jazzed to hear that."

"That means neither of you is going to get into trouble, no matter what you tell me," continued the man. "So, Kevin, if you have any idea where Cecil might be...I need to know."

Rescue

Dr. Everett Edmund -- social worker, licensed child psychologist, and man whose name nobody ever got right -- was in a business where late-night phone calls never meant anything good.

Especially late-night phone calls from scared eleven-year-olds whose mothers turned out to be going through a serious schizophrenic episode, and whose twin brothers were MIA.

Everett had already called Josie Ortiz while he was on his way over, so there would be two beds waiting by now. He helped Kevin Palmer pack a change of clothes and some comfort objects, and stayed with the boy on the way to Josie's, using all his professional authority to talk Kevin through this. ("I've helped lots of kids stay with Josie when their parents are sick. She takes excellent care of every one. She's an angel, and a good friend of mine, so you have nothing to worry about.")

In the meantime, someone at the office did some quick detective work and got back to him.

Cecil Palmer, Kevin had explained, had a "friend." An adult friend, at whose house he sometimes "slept over." Kevin didn't know much beyond the man's first name (Carlos), his job (scientist), and a vague description ("a beautiful man who does beautiful things"). But once Everett had the man's workplace, they could use the Isenberg Observatory website to track him down.

He had an address by the time he dropped Kevin off, and a warrant to look around by the time he showed up at Carlos Menendez's apartment building.

He even got to bring a couple officers along.

The doorbell woke Cecil up.

He snuggled unhappily against Carlos's side, reminding himself that it wasn't his problem. It was Carlos's apartment. Nobody would come here looking for Mom, much less Cecil himself. If something had to be done, Carlos would take care of it.

He could be a child around Carlos. He could feel safe and protected.

If only the noisy person at the door would go away.

An unshaven, baggy-eyed Dr. Menendez finally came to the old oak door of his apartment. Didn't open it all the way, just as far as the chain would go. "Somethin' I can do for you, officers?"

"I hope so," said Everett. He passed a KING CITY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES card through the crack in the door. "My name is Everett Edmund, and I'm the social worker for a boy who's gone missing. His name is Cecil Palmer -- we understand you know him."

"Cecil's missing?" repeated Menendez. "I just saw him this afternoon. I thought he went home right afterward...poor kid, do you think he's okay?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. Can we come in?"

"In...? He's not in *here*," said Menendez, seeming genuinely confused. "What scientific reason would he have to come here? I know he thinks I'm nice, for an adult, but he doesn't know where I live...and even if he did, it's an awfully long walk for a little kid."

"You know where *he* lives?"

"Sure. Gave him a ride a couple times when the buses were late. Do you have a contact number, Mr. ...Ernest, was it? If he does turn up here somehow, or if I find him at the observatory tomorrow, I'll call right away."

"It's Dr. Edmund," corrected Everett. "And I have a warrant to look around your home right now. Just in case. Please open the door."

Carlos was so fucked.

This guy in a tan jacket had an actual police warrant to search Carlos's home. It was very specific in the leeway it gave him, just looking around, no right to go through Carlos's drawers or turn over his furniture...but it wasn't like he had thought to stuff Cecil under the bed before answering the door.

Dr. Edward, or whatever his name was, strolled slowly through the kitchen and the dining nook. He stuck his head in the bathroom. He circled around through the living room. He glanced in Carlos's study. He called Cecil's name a couple of times.

The cops stayed at the entrance to the hall, so it wasn't like Carlos could panic and run. The actual cops. Fuck.

"You don't seriously think I have an eleven-year-old stashed in my bedroom," said Carlos, folding his arms over his hastily-thrown-on bathrobe, as Dr. Whatever approached the last

door.

"It's my job not to make assumptions," said the man in the tan jacket.

"Sure it isn't. Would this even be a question if I was white? Or straight? I could sue. I could get all your asses fired for discrimination."

That got a rise out of the man. He looked back at Carlos with narrowed eyes, and said, under his breath, "You think my ass is any whiter or straighter than yours?"

Now that he said it, Carlos wasn't sure. What race did the guy look like? Something about his features made them hard to pin down -- when he turned around, Carlos wasn't even sure how to describe them.

Jesus, he was so fucked.

Was there some mental condition he could claim? he wondered, as Dr. Edwin entered his bedroom. Some neurological problem that meant it was unfair to expect him to understand why it was inappropriate for a grown adult to keep a little boy in his --

"Cecil?" called Dr. Edwin.

Carlos looked over his shoulder into the room.

There was nobody in his bed. Even the sheets and pillows had been tossed around a little, so it wasn't like there were obvious dents from two people sleeping there not long ago.

Carlos was, scientifically speaking, several orders of magnitude less fucked than assumed.

Cecil had been too sleepy to come up with a clever escape plan.

So he was hiding in Carlos's closet, doing his best impression of a shirt.

He could hear the strange midnight visitor wandering around the apartment, saying things in a muffled voice. Was it the landlord? Some kind of safety inspector? The police? How long would it be before Carlos could convince them to go away?

The oak floorboards creaked right outside the bedroom. Cecil, wearing one of Carlos's shirts and squeezed in behind a row of lab coats on hangars, held his breath.

"Cecil?" said the voice.

It knew his name?

He knew the voice.

"Cecil, this is Dr. Edmund, from school," said the man who usually wore a tan jacket. "I'm here to pick you up. You're not in trouble, nobody's in trouble, but your mother is sick. Very sick. A co-worker of mine is watching Kevin while she's in the hospital, but none of us know where you are, and that's scary. Don't disappear on us, Cecil. Not now. You need to be with your family."

The man could be trusted. He was on Cecil's side.

And he was right.

It might make people suspicious of Carlos. They wouldn't understand. Well, Cecil would *make* them understand. He would say as much as he had to afterward, to keep Carlos from getting in trouble...and maybe Carlos would be mad anyway, maybe he'd be *really* mad that Cecil hadn't kept their secrets like he'd promised...but Cecil couldn't be Carlos's good boy right now. Not like this.

He tumbled forward through the forest of lab coats, and rolled back the closet door.

Transcripts

INT.
What prompted the school to get you involved?

E. EDMUND
One of the subjects, C., had an episode where a severe gag/choking reflex was triggered at a school event. He wasn't eating anything at the time, and you can see in the nurse's report that it was determined to be unrelated to his allergies. It's a symptom that can show up in victims of sexual abuse. Specifically, victims who have had a penis forced into the mouth.

There weren't any similar reasons to be concerned about his brother, K., but we knew that if one brother had become a victim, the other one was at risk for becoming a target. And they both showed the general effects of an unstable home life. You can see more about that, including Genia Palmer's medical records, in exhibit B.

INT.
Can you describe these emails, for the record?

S. CARLSBERG
Yes, sir. About a month ago I started marking down the times [C.] and Menendez spent alone in a locked room. I emailed all the numbers to myself, so they'd have timestamps. And if there was anything else that didn't seem right to me, I put that in too. Thought maybe if I got enough dots, eventually I'd have a line that meant something.

INT.
What prompted you to start making this paper trail?

S. CARLSBERG
Nothing specific at first. Just a bad feeling. I wanted to ignore it, because he seemed like such a great guy, you know? Friendly, thoughtful, brilliant as a scientist. And he'd become so nice and attentive toward [C.], even if [C.] didn't seem as happy, in response, as I would have expected. So I tried to convince myself that it wasn't real. But I couldn't, because I know that is what people always say.

That is what they always say.

INT.
Anything else you would like to add?

C. MENENDEZ
Just this: It is unbelievable that people are trying to turn my support of this poor kid into something sinister. He was in a bad home situation, and I felt for him. All I ever tried to do was be a caring figure in his life.

It's true, [C.] had a crush on me -- he had that from the start, ask anyone at the lab, that's not something I manipulated him into. And I would never take advantage of it! That whole idea is coming from these legal people, twisting what he's said. It can't be coming from him. I never did a thing to him that he didn't want.

G. PALMER
His future is written in stone tablets. On the silver sides of mirrors. In faded notebooks in the backs of closets. Be wary.

INT.
All I said was "please state your name."

Fifteen Years Later

Chapter Summary

> Epilogue. Contains alcoholism, discussion of past abuse, and survivors using dark humor about their experiences.

They ran into each other at the Home Depot, hands meeting over the same NTSC electronic tuner (55 MHz to 860 MHz, 75 ohm RF input and IF output, the last one on the shelf). "Oh, excuse me," said Cecil automatically -- then stopped, recognizing the man whose hand he had just touched.

"Hi," said Earl Harlan, looking a lot more composed than Cecil felt.

"Hey," stammered Cecil. What was the polite way to greet someone you knew from group therapy? *Hello, how are you, had any good panic attacks lately?*

"You can have it, if you want." Earl stepped away from the tuner. "I need more than one, so I'm going to have to back-order more anyway."

"What are you building?" asked Cecil. He hadn't realized Earl was interested in radio.

"Some of the boys are going for their Electronics badge. I thought we'd hack together some FM receivers. It'll get them through the circuitry requirements, and they'll end up building something useful they can show off to their friends."

Cecil could have said all kinds of things then. Cool facts about the history of radio...his own favorite shows and little-known community stations...how much he appreciated that Earl still thought the medium was worthwhile in this day and age. Instead, what came out of his mouth was, "Neat."

Earl either missed or politely ignored his embarrassment. "How about you? What are you working on?"

"A radio telescope." Cecil blushed. "That's the goal, anyway. I found plans on the Internet, and I thought: gosh, Cecil, you like radio, you like telescopes, why not take a shot at this? But it isn't on a deadline or anything. It was an impulse desire. I've never done anything like this before. It'll probably fall apart horribly. You might as well take the tuner -- I'm sure you'll put it to better use."

"Everyone has to start somewhere." Earl took the box off the shelf...and handed it to Cecil. "I do this a lot, so if you need advice or anything, you could call me up some time."

Cecil didn't just need advice. Cecil needed the loan of everything from a drill to a set of wire cutters. Also, someone to show him how to use them without taking off any fingers.

Cecil ended up spending a lot of time in Earl's dusty garage.

The finished product didn't look like much -- lots of tacky glue jobs and unpolished surfaces, and the mast of the antenna was literally a yardstick with holes drilled in it -- but it worked, and it was his, and Earl took him out for a drink to celebrate.

"How'd you pick the frequency to set it to?" asked Earl over his appletini, softly-lit by the glow of the restaurant chandeliers and the candle in its cut-glass holder in the middle of their table.

"There are a couple of mystery objects -- right above the double-star system we call Rigel B -- that I wanted to track," explained Cecil. "They put out pulses on that frequency at random intervals. Nobody knows why."

"Sounds cool. How'd you find out about them?"

Cecil hesitated, then gulped the rest of his drink (White Russian, safely free of orange slices or any other citrus) and decided, what the hell. "Got introduced by this astronomer I met when I was ten."

Earl had heard more than enough from Cecil in group to know what that meant. "Oh. God, sorry."

"Yeah." That was why Cecil hadn't talked about the building project in-group -- and was glad Earl had followed his lead. He didn't want to deal with so many people making the connection. But Earl...maybe Earl wouldn't judge him too hard. "I'm still into a bunch of the things he showed me. They make me happy. How fucked up is that?"

To his dismay, Earl's first reaction was defensive. "Do you think it's fucked up that I'm going through Scoutmaster training?"

"No!" said Cecil instantly. No, he didn't think anything of the kind, not even knowing that Earl's nightmares all went back to Cub Scout campouts. "But that's different. You kept loving Scouting *in spite of*...him."

"I don't think it's so different." Earl rested his elbows on the table, folding his arms: still defensive, but on Cecil's behalf as well as his own. "Who cares where the interest came from? If it's something you discovered you love, you deserve that. They have no right to ruin it for us. We have no obligation to let them."

The candle flame between them flickered and danced.

Neither of them noticed the waitress had returned until she said, "Can I get you gentlemen anything else? Another drink? Maybe some dessert menus?"

Cecil and Earl both jumped. "Just the checks, I think," stammered Earl, looking to Cecil for confirmation.

"All right. I'll be right back."

Some extra warmth in her smile caught Cecil's attention. "She thinks we're on a date," he murmured once she was out of earshot.

"Mmm," said Earl, in what was probably agreement.

Cecil took a moment to study Earl's own expression more closely. "Earl? *Are* we on a date?"

Earl's whole posture and demeanor shifted under the scrutiny. In that moment he looked less like the capable, independent young adult he was, and more like the kind of teenager neither of them ever got to be: unhurt, unscarred, cautious and anxious from nothing worse than inexperience as he tested the waters of his sexuality. "Would you want us to be?"

The next time they went out, it was for dinner, they called it a date from the start, and the kissing at the end lasted even longer.

Draped across the davenport like a lumpy throw rug, his senses safely dulled by peppermint schnapps, Cecil counted off points on his fingers. "Don't call me 'cute'. That's what he called me. Got me every time. And don't tell me it's okay, or insist that I'm fine, or anything like that. Said that all the time. Ask. That'll make all the difference, if you ask."

Earl, from the busted armchair Cecil got at a yard sale with the footrest that wouldn't go down, nodded. "Don't say cute. Ask your feelings. Got it."

"Great! Okay, now you go. What do I have to not say?"

"Don't worry. Only trigger you have to worry about is the plaid." Red plaid was the pattern lining the young Earl's sleeping bag. He'd already warned Cecil about it, and Cecil had gone through the closet and every other corner in his tiny apartment, gathering any potential danger fabrics to haul to the nearest Goodwill. "You're not gonna say what mine said. Not even by accident."

"Are you sure? How can you be sure?"

"Cecil. You're not gonna threaten to kill my parents if I tell. I'm sure."

Cecil's stomach turned. "Fuck," he said at last. "You win."

"Lucky me," deadpanned Earl.

"No. No, I am serious, you deserve some kinda...prize, getting through that. Not like a badge, either. More than a badge. Anyone ever given you a trophy? I'm gonna make you a trophy."

"Hey, at least I *had* parents. Sane ones, I mean. Ready to step up an' protect me the second I told. You...you deserve bonus points at least, surviving like you did with the mom you had."

"I will make us both trophies," declared Cecil. "Tomorrow -- you an' me -- we're going to the craft store. You will pick out your favorite color of glitter. We're gonna need a lot of it."

They placed matching glittery trophies on the shelves over each other's beds. They worked their way from clumsy petting to sloppy drunk handjobs to careful, sober, sexy exploration. They started finding each other's socks and T-shirts in their laundry baskets.

They carried the radio telescope up to the roof of Cecil's building, and discovered how much they could hear.

When Cecil had a bad day, he relied less on the regrettable strategy of getting drunk and swinging a baseball bat wildly around the room, or of getting drunk and spending days at a time in the same clothes without showering. Earl would bring over some healthy food, with protein or whatever, and sit by and listen while Cecil railed against the universe. The world always seemed more bearable the next morning -- and he didn't destroy so many of his possessions along the way.

When Earl had a bad day, he had always tried to burn it off with constant motion: building something in the garage, going for a hike, preparing a four-course meal, preferably all within the same few hours. Cecil forced him to hold still, offering a backrub if Earl wanted it or just sitting with him if he didn't, and said comforting things in his deepest, most soothing voice until Earl stopped feeling like the world was about to fall apart under him.

When they both had a good day, it made for some of the best days of Cecil's life.

"There's one more program you're supposed to work on even after you're officially a Trained Scoutmaster," said Earl. "Guess what it's called."

Cecil trailed his fingers in the water along the side of their rowboat. If there had been a Sweet Romantic Clichés course in Earl's training, this surely would have counted towards it. "I have no idea."

Earl told him.

Cecil goggled at him. "You're kidding."

"I am dead serious."

"They couldn't even call it the Forest Badge or something?"

"That's not where the name comes from." Earl grinned. "The origin is -- I swear I am not making this up -- the guy who founded the Scouts got this twelve-foot necklace of acacia beads on a military campaign in South Africa. Later, when he came up with this Scout-leader training course and wanted a cool award to give people at the end, he tied a couple of those beads on a string. Could've called it the Super-Special Leadership Beads or something, but no -- it's an achievement award like a badge, and it's made of wood, so...."

"...So the BSA unironically says to men, 'You are now certified to be an authority figure to this group of impressionable young boys, but it would be *even better* if you went and earned...a Wood Badge'." Cecil tried not to snicker, and failed. "Oh my God."

"I know."

"And all this time we thought you'd been abused! Why, it could have been just an innocent misunderstanding about program requirements."

"I *know!*" exclaimed Earl, laughing so hard it shook the boat. "I want to say that *all the time*, and I have to hold it in -- either they'll decide I should never ever work with kids, or, if I explain, they'll have to start from square one with processing how awful it is and how sorry they are for me. And I don't want to bring this up to have a therapy party! That's what I'm in therapy for."

"Oh, I don't know. A therapy party sounds a lot more fun than actual therapy. For one thing, I can only assume it would have more alcohol."

"There's an idea. You drink just enough to forget, but there's a licensed professional around to take the bottle away before you get so wasted you throw up on your boyfriend's favorite rug."

Cecil mock-pouted, shoving Earl's knee with his own. "I said I was sorry!"

"And I said it was okay." Earl rested both palms on Cecil's knees and leaned forward, sliding them up Cecil's thighs. "Although in penance, I will be expecting you to offer plenty of help and support once I start working on my Wood Badge."

The night before Earl officially completed his Introduction to Outdoor Leadership program, they climbed up to the roof of Cecil's building and watched the sun set together.

"I'm proud to be completing the Scoutmaster training continuum," admitted Earl. "I'm also terrified to be completing the Scoutmaster training continuum. The two emotions are mixing in my body and it's confusing."

Cecil had plenty of experience with confusing, mixed emotions. He felt them toward his mother, angry and hurt that she had failed so badly at protecting him, but unable to stop loving her all the same. And he felt them toward the man who had made him feel so loved and cared-for in one breath while systematically shredding his lifelong emotional well-being in the next.

Confusion was okay. Confusion didn't mean there was anything wrong with him. Was he a little fucked-up in general? -- sure. But all the shame for that belonged at his abuser's feet, not his own.

"I think we're all both proud and terrified most of the time," he said. "Because we are incredible, tough, awesome people, and we have the trophies to prove it. That's where the pride comes from."

"And the terror?"

"Oh, the terrified part is because life is terrifying," said Cecil. "It just is."

He draped an arm across Earl's shoulders. Earl shivered. "Keep talking."

"The past is gone, and cannot harm you anymore." It was a lie, but in that moment, Cecil made it sound almost convincing. "And while the future is fast coming for you, it always flinches first, and settles in as the gentle present. This now, this *us,* we can cope with that. We can do this together, you and I."

That part was more likely to be true. They had done so much together already, after all.

Earl seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "Do you mind if we run back downstairs and grab the radio telescope?" he asked, winding his own arm around Cecil's lower back. "I'm getting an impulse desire to listen to your lights."

Epilogue (Rescue: Reprise)

Chapter Notes

The final chapter.

Thank you again to everyone who has followed along and left supportive comments on this story. The content has led to a lot of flaming and accusation, some of it disturbingly graphic, and part of the reason I was able to shake that all off was because I knew there were people who did want to read this. More than that -- people who found it helped them process their own experiences, or who took other kinds of comfort from reading it.

Your support has meant a lot to me. I wish love and strength to every one of you. (And cats, if you're the kind of person who also takes comfort from cats.)

"This poor boy was a rescue," said the woman Cecil was interviewing, stopping at a new cage. The animal inside was curled up in the safety of a carpet-covered tube, one pale-gold eye glaring out of the shadows. "The owners were training bigger, meaner animals to terrorize the smaller ones. It's horrifying, what some people get away with! Coco here is doing much better now -- he's one of our great success stories -- but there are always more animals in need, and we need the support of the community to keep helping them."

Cecil interviewed her about everything at the shelter, asking questions and recording his observations; to be packaged and made into a single polished report for the evening news. He was a professional. He didn't shirk.

But when the work was finished, he lagged behind for a full hour, standing by the rescue cat's cage.

The cat came out and sniffed his hand, allowing Cecil to scratch what was left of its ears. Cecil was enraptured. "Hey, buddy. You're a tough guy, aren't you? You're a fighter. Never let nobody knock you down, huh, boy? You should have a tougher name than *Coco*."

Less than a minute after he knew the Scout meeting would be letting out, he was on the sidewalk out by the parking lot, phone in hand.

"Hey, Cecil," said Earl when he picked up. "What is it? Everything okay? Are we still on for barbecue with your brother tonight?"

"Yeah, dinner's still under control. And there's nothing bad going on," said Cecil. "I just need to ask...are you allergic to cats?"

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